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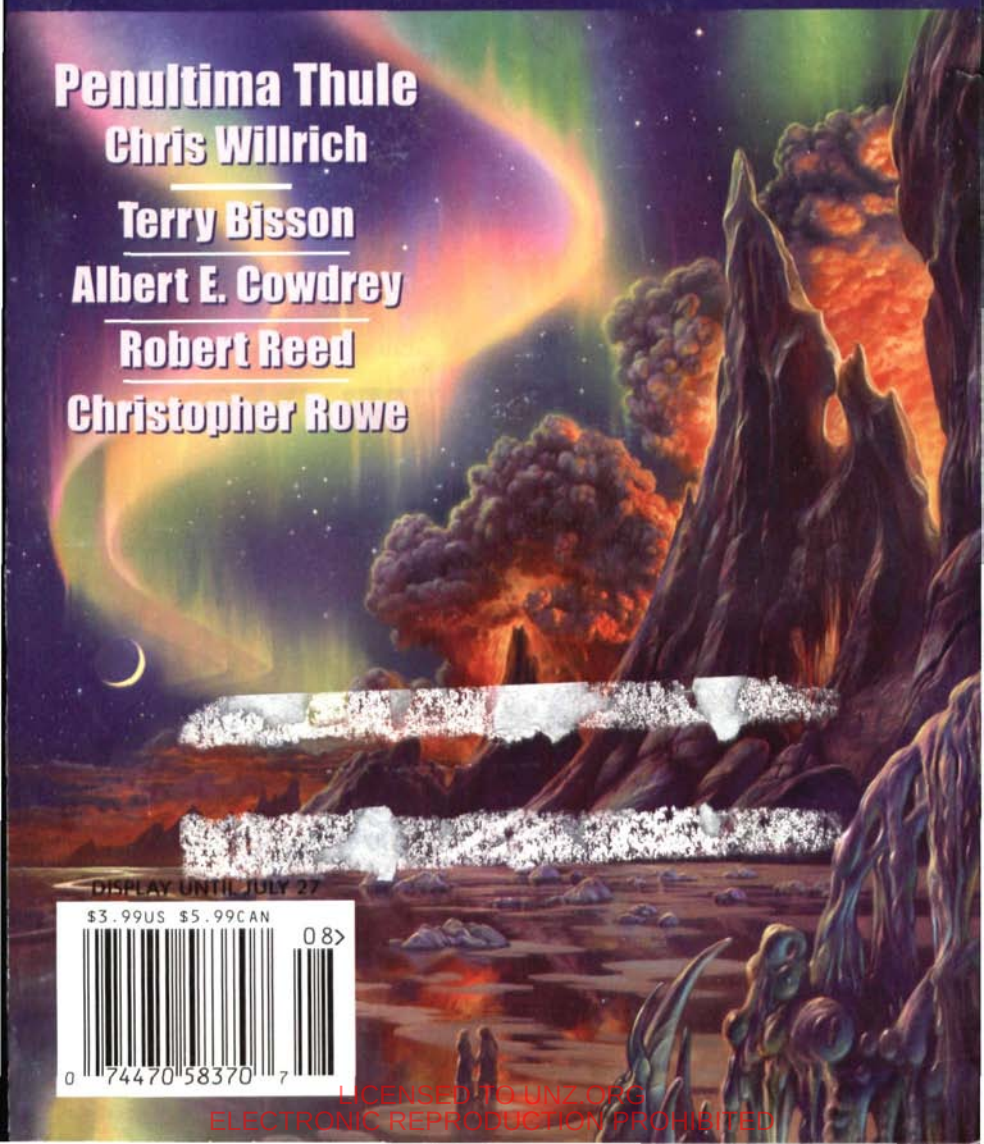

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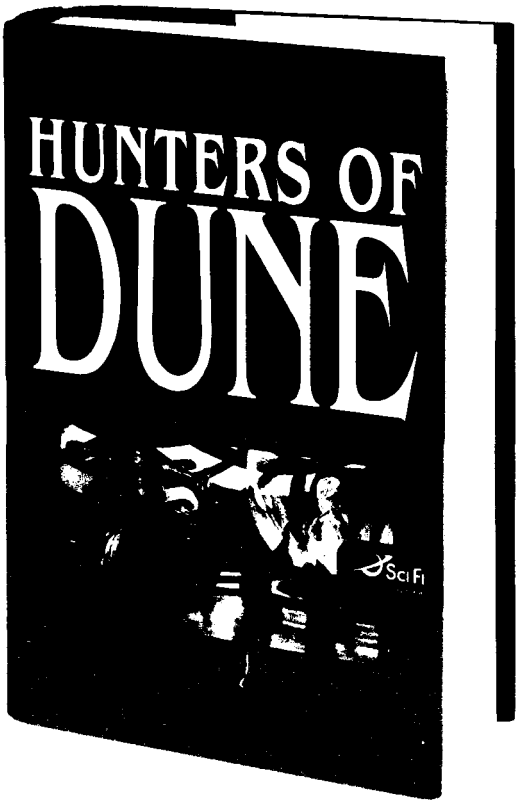

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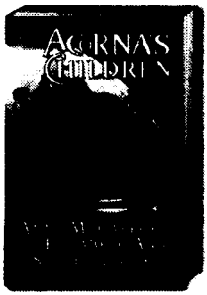

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The Caspas Game

by Ross Braught

Enter an enchanted kingdom where a boy's adventures start when a juggler throws a box containing a board game at him and tells him to keep it. The boy, Cedrin, is pursued by a gang of thieves and bad magicians who also want the game. A will-o'-the-wisp lures Cedrin and his traveling companions, a girl and a comic bagpiper, into a forest containing ogres and dragons.

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Cedrin heard a loud crack near his left shoulder as he sped past an oak tree leaning over the path. Hard as the wood of that tree was, there was now an arrow deeply imbedded in it. Glancing over his shoulder, past the shivering end of the deadly shaft, far up the path, he saw framed against the sky, an archer in a red tunic, reaching for another arrow. But Cedrin rounded a bend, plunged down a steep hillside, and the bowman did not get in a second shot.

As long as he had been on the grounds of Laxtel fair, surrounded by the local townspeople, the gang of cutthroats could not harm him. But along the deserted path and in the surrounding countryside, they could do as they pleased. The solution was very simple: he must not get caught.

"Come back with the box!"

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We met Gaunt and Bone (poet and thief, respectively) back in our June 2000 issue and saw their adventures continue in the July 2002 issue. We're pleased to welcome them back this month, although we hope they won't share with us that infernal book they've got.

Mr. Willrich dedicates this story to our dearly departed friend John Morressy. Any resemblances between Krumwheezle and another wizard whose name starts with the letter K are only slightly coincidental.

Penultima Thule

By Chris Willrich

IN A TIME, O CHILD, WHEN wizards toyed with gravity, thieves were heroes, and the Aurora was not yet born, a poet fled north to World's Rim. Her name was Persimmon Gaunt, and she stumbled in the purple sunset across the tundra, her breath streaming behind as she gasped late autumn air. Birds scattered before her, crying *tuituek! tuituek!* Beyond stretched a plain cloaked in desert-brown lichens, stained with regions of thicker vegetation such as the one she now battled. Thick clumps of sedge clutched at her ankles; polygonal swaths of ice splintered beneath her feet. She trampled ground-hugging dwarf willows and birches like a crazed giant. These were the northmost representatives of tree-kind, for the taiga lay at her back. Dark evergreens fanned out a mile behind her, rising taller and milling thicker in proportion to her distance — as if tree society wanted no part of Persimmon Gaunt and her foul book.

But there *were* those that wanted both.

At treeline's edge reared a stark birch stockade with heads of many kinds impaled upon the timbers' points. There were caribou and muskox,

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arctic fox and brown bear, and though there were none of the white bear, the *Tornarssuk*, there were many open-mouthed heads of men. The wall of the stockade grew to irregular heights, and a shadow like a hand clawed across the plain.

A horn blew, burning through cold silence. A mocking, snarling chant arose. The voices were of many ages, and both sexes. The words carried far in the clear, still air.

Hunger Stone! Hunger Stone!

She could not help but look back. The hunters were unseen, but their mammoth-sized sacrificial boulder rose to just above the level of the stockade. She thought she discerned a man-shaped shadow stretched upon it.

Hunger Stone! Hunger Stone!

She turned and staggered on. Panting, lungs aching with the cold, she could imagine Imago Bone beside her crying: *Absurd, Gaunt! Nothing to scramble upon or slip behind. We, a pair of city thieves, in the arctic! We're like church mice on an archery range.*

Then she pictured him where he actually was. She recalled him shouting from the Hunger Stone, *I love you too.*

At last Gaunt crossed the patch of sedge and dwarf trees and fell to her knees upon a stony streambed. She slipped loose her pack, and her back slowly unclenched from the weight. She carried, it seemed, a northern trading post's worth of equipment — fur cloaks, torches, pickaxes, a bow, dried meat. But what seemed heaviest was the reason Gaunt and Bone had sought the Rim.

She always sensed the enchanted book's location near the top of the pack, as though a rabid rat snuffled her neck.

"You are too much trouble," she told the thing they'd meant to be rid of. "But you will serve me yet. I will have him back."

"It is a *cacography*, this book," the wizard had rasped the day they struck for Earth's edge. "And its power grows."

Krumwheezle of Scuttlesand had frowned at Persimmon Gaunt and Imago Bone. "Forgive me — a term of Art." He was an unprepossessing fellow; the wizard's white beard covered a craggy face while his fisherman's sweater covered a sizable paunch. He'd come recommended as that

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extreme rarity: an unambitious yet powerful mage. He'd even seemed glad of visitors, and had eagerly scrutinized *Mashed Rags Bound in Dead Cow* through a rune-inscribed silver monocle.

But now he slumped back in a wicker chair beneath the stuffed remains of former familiars.

Staring up through the glass of the wizard's solarium, Persimmon Gaunt considered his warning. "Cacography," she answered with a bleak smile. "I assume you don't simply mean 'badly written'?"

It was a sunny day upon the Contrariwise Coast, but she only saw this through the sparkle on the surf above. Krumwheezle's tower descended like an incisor from a cliffside overhang, the gravity within reversed. In solarium glass, framed by the turquoise of the wavetops, Gaunt beheld herself. She could still make out the sturdy Swanisle farm girl, pale face beneath a mop of auburn hair. She could still discern the morbid poet who'd bought a rose-and-spiderweb tattoo for her cheek.

But more than that, she beheld the traveler with a year of wandering behind her. She was lean of face, focused of gaze. She'd glimpsed much of human pain at Imago Bone's side. Yet through the worst there were moments of strange beauty...and stranger acts of mercy. Like the generosity of an unambitious wizard.

Krumwheezle coughed, held up a finger. "That is the mundane meaning. But mundane 'bad writing' merely annoys. Magical cacographies corrupt and kill."

He narrowed his eyes at the book on the cedar table, as though scrutinizing a vulture on a stump. "They are full of tantalizing lore. Yet their ink is rife with contagion. And I have never seen one that dripped so with malice. Indeed, I suspect the creator far exceeded expectations. Most authors of cacographies hope their work will be copied, to plague the world. But no one could survive the ordeal of transcribing this tome. How ever did you come by it?"

Gaunt heard the ocean surge above her head like an oncoming storm. "The price of escaping a more immediate problem." She declined to elaborate, as did Bone. "You say it's growing in strength."

Krumwheezle spread his hands. "Over time the viral enchantment has evolved. It is learning how to damage its victims without killing them." He shook his head at the book. To all appearances it was a

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nondescript folio in frayed leather, stuffed with uneven linen pages. There was no evident reason for the sunlight to be muted in that place, but so it was.

Krumwheezle looked up. "You two, for instance."

Bone, silent till now, shifted uneasily in his chair. A wary look sharpened his narrow face. He had reasons for wariness, Gaunt knew, only beginning with the blade-scar upon one cheek and the flame-scar upon the other. He did not like wizards, or the things they spawned.

"Us?" he said.

"Your auras are tainted by the thing," Krumwheezle replied. "You have probably been having your own sorts of ill luck. Tell me, are you prone to weird misadventures, strange coincidences? Old enemies just happening to trip over you on the street? Nameless horrors just happening to erupt near your inn?"

Poet and thief shared a look. Bone shrugged. "Just so...things just happen."

Krumwheezle shook his head. "No, friends. This is not simply the mad hard life of an adventurer. It's the enchantment, adapting itself." The old man flushed beneath his beard. "Now, forgive me: I assume your partnership is more than strictly business?"

In the solarium's heat, a dry whiff of leather and dust crossed from the book to Gaunt, as if the tome were tickling her, drawing her attention. She wrinkled her nose. "A touch impertinent...," she observed.

"You assume correctly," Bone said.

"Yet there has been no pregnancy?" Krumwheezle pressed.

Gaunt widened her eyes. "More than a touch...."

"No," Bone said slowly. "For many years my associates were angels of death. Long before I met Gaunt, it seemed such company had made me infertile."

"Ah, that may be," the wizard said. "But I suspect the book's proximity would prevent children in any case. It's begun to draw its noose around you."

"So it's trying to kill *us*?" Gaunt exclaimed. "Even though we've not read a word?"

"Marvelous!" Bone cried, slapping his knee. "We thought destroying the book would be dangerous. But all the while the thing's drawn peril like

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a breadmaker draws pigeons. We'd have been safer dropping the thing down a well. That's what comes of charity!"

Even months later as she crouched upon the tundra, Gaunt recalled the haunted eyes behind the mirth. Things had changed, too, for Imago Bone. Perhaps it was the mention of children, and the blush the thought had raised in her face. What was in *his* face had been clear to her: now he had something to lose.

Indeed, his expression had barely darkened when the wizard muttered, "It is worse than that, Imago Bone. This book may kill us all."

The sentry barked at Gaunt beneath the gaping human heads and bright sickle moon.

Despite his caribou-hide clothing he, like his fellow Stonekin, was no true Northerner. The Old People fled these lands centuries before. He was no reindeer herder or *iglu* dweller, but a pale man of Eldshore, come up to Stonemouth seeking a brighter, sharper sort of life. That was what the taiga people whispered of the strange Southerners who moved to tundra's edge. They were all of them questers, hoping the ice-winds would harden them, prove their worth.

But whatever beliefs they carried they soon discarded like sucked bones. The Stone's whispers were creed enough. Beneath the sentry's fur cap lay the proof; the flesh around his ears was scarred by the touch of stony fangs.

"Who's there?" he said, leaning out the stockade door.

Gaunt had learned enough thievery from Imago Bone that she already crouched nearby. Krumwheezle had provided fur parkas, pants, and mittens that blended well with the shadows. She was near enough to feel the man's cloud of warm breath hit her cold-numbed face. Near enough to smell old beer and rancid spiced meat. Near enough to respond with an open book.

"Fool prey!" laughed the guard in Roil, the language of Eldshore and the Spiral Sea. "You come back here, armed with that? I'll gut your book, then your belly. I can't even read." He raised a stone-tipped spear.

But *It matters not*, Gaunt answered silently. *The writing is magical. The dialect is archaic, and it matters not. The light is poor, and it matters not. The letters infest your mind like wasps laying eggs in meat.*

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But all she said aloud was, "I am sorry."

For this book was the testimony of a thousand ghosts, all slain in some bizarre and pathetic manner. In its pages the mad medium Cindersmith had congealed those spirits' hollow-eyed resignation, and unleashed metaphysical poison. The book was not truly evil — for evil, too, was a meaning. And all meaning corroded under the influence of *Mashed Rags Bound in Dead Cow*. The tome embodied all that was broken and pointless.

"'I carried my ten-month-old daughter in my left arm,'" recited the guard, transfixed. "'I, emperor of Nobeca, feared by all. Laughing, she scratched me in the eye. By instinct my right hand warded the eye — my right hand, which bore a spiked gauntlet. Thus did I pierce my brain. Now I, in my ghostly wanderings, can take pride only that I sat the babe down before I died.'"

The sentry blinked.

"You fight me with a *ghost story*?"

"What's happening?" demanded a voice behind him.

The sentry spun to answer, and impaled his eye upon his comrade's spear.

The sentry wailed, and the comrade shouted, and their grotesque embrace shoved the spear-tip deep into the sentry's skull.

The ill-luck of the book had claimed another life. Gaunt slipped through the gate, aware she'd purchased entry by corroding the substance of the world.

Inside, Stonemouth resembled an ordinary town, the wall's ghoulishness giving way to corduroy lanes of birch trunk, tidy log houses with snow-dusted roofs, firelight and chimney-smoke. For this reason Gaunt and Bone had disregarded the wall as local color and succumbed to the lures of a warm room and a hot meal. They'd ignored the downcast looks of the old and infirm, the wild leers of the hardier men and women, and the strange scars around everyone's ears. So too they had disregarded the unusually vile stench of the slaughterhouses.

They'd discounted it all. And now Bone lay bound to the final thing they'd dismissed: the granite boulder big as a khan's tent, covered in dark stains and peppered with fissures like maws with milky-white quartz teeth.

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Bone had secured Gaunt's escape when the Stonekin rushed them in the town's single inn. And though she'd cursed him, she'd nonetheless fled.

It might be the world would suffer because she could not make herself press Rimward. But in the scales of her mind this one thief outweighed all the Earth. Not by much, for she loved the world in all its variety and perplexity. Perhaps even by as little as the weight of his hand upon her shoulder. But that was enough.

She crept beside the Hunger Stone and encountered another sentry. This one was forewarned by the shouts. He thrust a knife at Gaunt, the blade shining blue in the moonlight.

But the knife hit the opened *Mashed Rags Bound in Dead Cow*. To Gaunt's touch, the tome quivered more like a thick carcass than a book. At the same time, her foe's knife hummed as though connecting with steel.

It vibrated in just the right manner to expose a flaw in the metal. It snapped with a *ting*.

And now, fixated by the text Gaunt would never dare glance upon, the Stonekin intoned, "'In the finest eatery of Archaeopolis I choked upon a pomegranate seed. With my finger I goaded my throat into surrendering the seed. But at that moment the great earthquake began. Thus I choked a second and final time, upon my own severed finger.'"

The sentry's eyes widened. They seemed cold, flinty things. In them Gaunt perceived a wild ruthlessness that could humble man or beast or weather.

But even ruthlessness can be an ideal, a meaning.

Gaunt bore the death of meaning.

The Stonekin shook off his reverie and lunged at Gaunt...and slipped on the only uncleared patch of ice in the village.

There was a perfect fall for snapping the neck, and he found it.

"Forgive me," Gaunt whispered.

Her thoughts fled to the interview with Krumwheezle, to Bone's pained laughter and the wizard's sad cough.

"Kill us all?" Gaunt had repeated, startled by the words.

"In the long run," Krumwheezle had answered, "yes. I've never seen

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such a powerful cacography, and its malignancy has begun to spread beyond immediate contact. Any you've encountered while owning it may also be afflicted."

"Skath," Bone muttered, and "Rainjoy," Gaunt said.

"They in turn may infect others. A plague of freak misfortune will spread. But that's only the beginning." Krumwheezle looked overhead to the stuffed cat, frog, rat, and raven caught in a wave-cast net of sunlight. "I'll console myself that my own life's in autumn, that soon enough I'll join my familiars. You see, the ill-luck slices deeper than you know. As a practitioner of Art, I know our world's suffused with *meaning*."

Gaunt pushed back a little in her chair. Something slipped, and the chair teetered. Her stomach went queasy while she righted herself and stared directly at the tome.

Perhaps by a trick of the light, it seemed to have shifted closer.

Krumwheezle continued, "Ours is a magical world, friend rogues, and magic is simply meaning given motion, heft, and voice. But this book triggers freak mishaps that defy all rhyme or reason."

Gaunt took up the cup of Mirabad tea beside the book. Though sharp in just the manner she liked, the tea seemed hotter than it had earlier, and after one sip her stomach threatened to rebel. The cup quivered in her grip; a hot drop stung her wrist.

"They're like gashes in the fabric of our reality," Krumwheezle continued. "For they declare that life is *meaningless*. As if we were all merely fodder for cruel jokes."

Bone sensed Gaunt's unease, put his hand upon her shoulder. She reached for it gratefully, meshed her fingers with his.

After a pause, Krumwheezle said, "The more lives snuffed by the book, the more meaning dims. Indeed, our world — a flat Earth where the nearer stars are luminescent dragon eggs, the farther ones divine campfires — cannot exist without meaning and beauty. Like as not we'll vanish like a punctured soap bubble."

"How long?" Bone asked.

"Centuries perhaps. Or perhaps years. But that will be the ultimate result of your blasted book."

"Master Krumwheezle?" Gaunt prompted after a long silence. "How can we destroy it?"

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The wizard pressed his temple. "I fear the problem is beyond me." Glumly he ticked off scores of arcane remedies, of the sort that vanquished foul artifacts of the past: dragonfire, alchemical solutions, the weight of levitating islands. But none were available to folk of the modern West, even to such as Gaunt and Bone. Even volcanoes were not as hot as in Elder Days.

Bone was looking up at the inverted surf, its patterns flashing bright one moment, drowned the next. "What did you say about our world?" he said quietly.

Krumwheezle sighed. "It is a world suffused in meaning, and thus vulnerable...."

"No. You said the Earth is *flat*. I always knew that. But I did not think...Gaunt, can we not simply throw the book off the edge?"

She nodded. "Yes! Yes. It seems too obvious. But sometimes obvious solutions are best."

Yet it seemed to her that Krumwheezle gave them the bleakest of looks, as at children who announce they will make everyone in the whole world happy, or bring an end to evil.

"I will advise you and equip you," he answered, "but I will not accompany you. Forgive me."

THE VOICE OF Stonemouth's headman shattered the memory.

"*Forgive* is a weakling's word."

The tall man lurked in shadow beside the looming Hunger Stone. Gaunt glimpsed the Stone's rough angularity rising against the white smile of the moon. Dozens of rudely shaped, crystal-fanged mouths shone in the argent light.

"Told you," Bone's voice drifted weakly down from the Stone, "to get away from here...." He was bound at ankles and wrists by ropes. Nothing secured the ropes but four grinning crystal mouths.

"Hush, Imago," Gaunt said. She told the headman, "I don't like killing," keeping the book half-shut. "Let it end now."

"Weak!" the headman snapped, stepping into the moonlight. He wore a sneer and the white skin of an arctic bear. The sides of his head were ringed in scar tissue and his ears resembled gnawed fungus. "Fit only for food!"

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Food sang a moaning chorus from the stony mouths. *Fit food.*

Gaunt sensed many Stonekin peering from windows, peeping around corners, creeping forward along the log lanes. She gripped the book tight. "Let my friend go."

The headman laughed. Gaunt saw that one of his teeth had been replaced by a quartz fang. Stifling her fear, she lifted the book.

But the headman raised a hand. The Hunger Stone rumbled and croaked.

Go friend, moaned the stone maws. There were flashes of crystal teeth all around Imago Bone.

Gaunt cried out and flung the book open. Her palm caught a corner, and the old paper was unaccountably sharp. It pierced her skin. Her blood made dark edge-marks.

"'I survived my campaign as general,'" the headman read. "'But the day of my victory parade, a chamber pot toppled from an upper window....'"

"Gaunt," Bone called weakly. "I'm all right. The Stone...it cut my cords."

She slammed the book shut. Her hand throbbed with the motion.

The Stonekin came to his senses, looking dazed. Gaunt had forestalled the curse, barely.

"Bone," Gaunt said, "let's go."

Bone slithered down the Stone like a snake on a shovel. Gaunt caught him.

The headman shook his head as though waking. "Do...what you must." But as he faced the thief, it seemed the ill-luck brushed him, for he bit his own lip with the quartz fang.

"Don't touch them!" he cried, blood streaming from his mouth. Then quietly he spat, "For know this...you belong to the Stone."

You belong, the Stone echoed.

Droplets of the headman's blood upon them, Gaunt and Bone stumbled toward the wall and World's Rim.

Krumwheezle's library had illuminated little of the Rim. Sneezing amid dust and cobwebs, Gaunt had time and again seen the symbols on maps dwindle edgeward like stars beside clouds. Sometimes cartographers

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helpfully decorated these spaces with ships tumbling over waterfalls, sea serpents, drowning sailors. And there were labels: *Ye Abyss*, or *Hungry Void*, or more bluntly, *Abandon All Hope*. But once she was struck by a purely blank region atop a map, like a landscape buried in snow. This was glossed with the perverse phrase *Penultima Thule*. Thule, Gaunt knew, meant *Northern Land*. But that the mapmaker would stop with the *almost-but-not-quite-northmost-land*...now that was a mystery, a conspiracy of cartographers.

All she learned from Krumwheezle's books was that Penultima Thule was a frigid waste, once inhabited by seal-hunters and reindeer herders, but now stalked by the most barbaric of southern folk. Of the original inhabitants, only the ursine *Tornarssuk* remained: fierce white bears with mastery of simple tools.

Little would have recommended Penultima Thule — except for the odd legend or three that from there one could walk to World's Rim. All other accounts of the Rim involved mariners with spyglasses watching sister ships topple into the void. Doubtful as Penultima Thule might be, Gaunt and Bone were more dubious about suicide. And so their path bent north, beyond the rugged polities of the Contrariwise Coast, into the grand littoral empire of the Eldshore, and beyond into the dark green sea of the taiga.

The forest of emerald evergreens and golden broadleafs bore a silence so deep as to seem deafening. It stole their voices, so that Gaunt missed the riotous chatter of cities. It made their talks rare, and serious.

"It's just as well we could have no children," Gaunt had said one day. "Such a life is not for them."

"I'm relieved you think so," Bone answered.

"And yet...to see young eyes drink in the Orca Coast's watery labyrinth...or the diamond and turquoise wall of the Titancrypt Glacier, and the Skyblade Mountains beyond...."

"Or the cutthroats of Archaeopolis's Crypttown?" Bone said. "Or the vile sorcery of the Old School?" Bone said. "Or their parents gorged and drunk in the vice gardens of Amberhorn...if not dead in some sewer or charnel pit?" He shook his head, his gaze looking back over long years as a thief. "Better those eyes never exist."

"True," Gaunt said. But she fell silent, as if those eyes were upon her.

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Despite this agreement, the moment weighed upon them as deeply as the chill and the hunger. And so distracted, they had exercised little caution upon reaching Penultima Thule.

That, Gaunt swore, would not happen again. But her oath might be too late.

They hiked in moonlit silence, crossing Gaunt's dry riverbed and continuing north. Cold still air polished the stars, which seemed as diamond spear-tips piercing the night's veil. They paused when Gaunt, nursing her stinging hand, tripped over the pale rack of a vanished caribou. A dim wind-moan punctuated the curse and the rattle.

"You used it," Bone said as he rubbed her sprained leg. These were his first words since Stonemouth.

"They were going to kill you," she said.

"No," Bone murmured. He slid her wide fur pant leg (baggy at the base, for heat flowed upward) and absently kissed her calf in an inappropriate, albeit pleasant way. His beard stubble tickled. "I'm afraid they weren't. And now they know about the book."

"They weren't going to kill you?" Gaunt shivered, and not just from the air and Bone's ministrations. "If that wasn't a classic human sacrificial — Bone?"

He had quietly clamped his teeth around her calf. It was a warm sensation in the chill, but quickly grew painful.

"Bone!"

He flinched backward, puzzlement creasing his face. "Gaunt...I don't...."

"What were you doing? A friendly bite's one thing in an Archaeopolis inn...."

He rubbed his temple. "Something overcame me." Looking northward he said, "It's what I meant before...about Stonemouth. They didn't want to kill either of us. They wanted to lash us to the Stone. So the mouths could fasten upon us, and...whisper."

He turned, the moonlight revealing the dark welts around one ear.

"Bone...What did it whisper?"

"I rarely made out the words. But the sense of them stuck. It was about need, longing, starvation. I'm *hungry*, Gaunt." His jaw twitched. "The

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Hunger Stone makes you mad with it. There's a gnawing inside. Not just the need of a man with an empty gut. I feel like a whole world...with a ravenous edge like a mountain range of teeth. There are many Hunger Stones scattered across the far north, Gaunt...stray children of the Rim." He shook his head, as though to rend the cobwebs of nightmare. He looked north into the phalanx of stars. "We thought of the Rim as a place. I fear it's more. I fear it's a Being."

Despite the recurring peal of horns, the hunters kept their distance.

"They expect me to join them," Bone said simply one day. He looked thin and shrunken within his furs. "They're calling me back."

"And what becomes of me?" Gaunt asked.

He did not answer, but gnawed at a strip of dried meat.

For five days the thieves had crossed Penultima Thule. It was a strange realm for those accustomed to rocky coasts and many-towered cities.

Krumwheezle had told Gaunt this land was saturated with frozen water, which thawed only near the surface. Nothing deep-rooted grew. What at first sight appeared an unending expanse of sand or soil was a ubiquitous brown lichen, supplemented in fertile stretches by thick mats of mosses, sedges, and dwarf trees. Amid these grew mushrooms and berries, startling in their color. Once they saw a white fox snuffling among constellations of little fruits pink as salmon meat. It darted off before Gaunt could draw her bow, and so they contented themselves with the berries.

Despite the cold, the emptiness, the lean meals, Gaunt began to see a delicate beauty in the plain. Evil folk might dwell here, yet the tundra itself held no foulness.

But then the sky's vast pale blue thickened with gray-white, as if the fox had heralded the clouds. Where once the days yawned wide, now they pressed down. Snow fell — in a lazy dusting of meandering flakes, as though the land had all eternity to kill them. It grew colder, and as if in response the gash in Gaunt's palm swelled and darkened.

On the fifth day, while Bone rested, Gaunt raised the open book to a plump ptarmigan, its white girth like a feathered egg with a head, its black eyes like windows to the Rim. As she expected, the bird just sat upon its snow-dappled boulder, watching her sidelong. The victim need not be a

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reader, it seemed, but must have at least the capacity to learn. Gaunt sighed and took up her bow. But the bird had seen such before, and was gone in a blur.

That evening Bone crouched at their tent's opening, staring at a moonlit snowfall resembling blue motes drifting in the sea. Where once he'd shaved religiously by dagger-blade, now he wore the scraggly beard of some immature prophet. He tore into the dwindling dried meat. As she chewed on sour and watery black berries, he eyed her with what she preferred to believe was lust.

"Any cannibal thoughts?" she asked.

He grunted. "*Cannibal* implies preference for human flesh. Stonekin aren't so picky."

"Is that what you are now, Bone? Stonekin?"

"Never," he snapped. He tore into another strip of meat. More quietly he continued, "I do feel their hunger. Perhaps it's this landscape...starvation seems so close at hand, survival so precarious. And the Stone...it speaks to a part of you that feels like a gnawing void, that needs filling up. A part that wouldn't dream of missing a meal." He met her gaze. "Even if the only candidate walks upright and shares your bed."

"Well, you are looking a little threadbare."

"Fortunately, so are you." He grimaced. "They wanted us both, at first. A strong, healthy couple to convert. But now they're content to let me kill you and return with the book. Idiots. They think the book's just another weapon, when it's really a power as bleak as the one they serve. I don't hate anyone enough to surrender the book. And yet, in a few more days I may obey."

She took his hand. "You've yet to obey anything in your life."

He grinned, and was at least a shadow of his old self. "You're a poet. You tell lies to make people smile."

"You're addressing the author of *Crypt Lyrics* and *Songs of a Skull-to-Be.*"

"So noted." He leaned close.

How arrogant, Gaunt thought, *to think you can evade this conversation with a kiss.*

And how correct. As she moved her mouth within spiderthread-width of his, she said, "No biting. No talk of what made you bite."

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"My lips are sealed."

"Not entirely, I hope — "

A new horn blast cut through the moaning wind.

All previous peals had diminished with increasing distance from Stonemouth. This one sounded close.

"I believe," Bone said, "the Stonekin have lost their patience."

THEY STRUCK CAMP, hiking in a snowy moonwashed vastness like the shallows of a blue-lit sea. The horn kept sounding behind them, and the thieves' southern-bred ears failed to place the range.

Gaunt wouldn't stop to listen more carefully.

"We just need someplace defensible," she told Bone, trying to reassure both of them. "If we can bottleneck them...."

"Ironic," Bone interrupted, panting. "The headman's...lost patience. But this march, heh, is making me *hungry*."

"I do appreciate the warning. Keep moving."

He staggered on. "I won't succumb."

"I know."

"I would destroy myself first."

"Bone, enough."

"But if I were to turn...you must use the book."

For a moment she could not answer. This was the sort of thing he usually said *(You must use the book; this concoction's vile but will negate the poison; I've stolen the empress of Amberhorn's diamond fingernail that I might scratch your back)* where an ordinary man might say *I love you*. There were times she wished he were ordinary.

"Very well," she said. "But if I should perish, you must take it to the Rim."

"I care little about that. Let the world pop into nothingness, if you are not in it!"

"Swear, Imago."

"Never fear," he sighed. "If you are gone, what's left for me but to follow your last wish, even to the edge of the Earth?"

Her eyes narrowed. "And you must swear not to throw yourself off."

She saw she'd struck true. "You astound me, woman!" he snapped.

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"How many more instructions? Must I now give my loot to the poor? Make the sign of the Swan Goddess before every ambush? Eat a radish a day? If I choose to fall off World's Rim, that's between me and the abyss."

He turned, stomped into the snow-flecked moonlight, and — with a squeaking, shattering sound and a brief yelp — plunged out of sight.

"Bone!"

Gaunt ran forward and stared down. What confronted her was a frozen river channel with a Bone-sized gap in its shining surface. Beneath that gap lay an ice-roofed tunnel and a groaning thief upon a dry, silty riverbed.

After its surface froze over, Gaunt supposed, the river must have dried up, perhaps from the freezing of its watershed. The deep water, insulated from the cold air, would stay liquid and empty out to sea, leaving behind a tunnel with a crystalline ceiling.

Or perhaps this was all wild speculation, and the land was simply trying to kill them.

But Bone was alive, nursing his ankle with a disgusted expression.

"Bone! How's your foot?"

"It will heal."

"Your pride?"

"We won't speak of it."

He looked up, evaluating the climb even as she considered the downward scramble. "Unfortunate," he said, "that we lost my ironsilk lines, along with my other tricks, at Stonemouth. If I rest a day I believe I can handle the climb. But that seems ill-advised."

"You may not have to," Gaunt said. "The river's path should intersect the Boreal Bight, if our sources were correct about its existence. Following this tunnel would hide us from pursuit."

"I would be happy to be out of the open. There is one flaw however."

"Yes?"

"Upstream I've just spotted the nose of an adorable little white bear."

Gaunt's heart felt swollen in her chest. "Bone," she said in a low voice. "Try moving downstream. I'll follow from up here."

"You certainly will stay up there," he said, rising unsteadily. "You are not going to meet that bear's mother."

She readied her bow, searched for the blue glimmer of the frozen river. "If you meet the mother, you must scream."

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"I can oblige."

So they moved together downstream, him below the shimmering ceiling, her above. After several minutes she heard a thunderous bellow from behind and below the ice, while ahead and below came Bone's muffled oath.

And now the Stonekin howled close.

Gaunt ignored the Stonekin, drew, and fired. The wound in her palm wrung tears from her eyes, but her aim was good. Her shot did not break the ice but cracked it at a point well behind the *Tornarssuk's* roar, making eerie chirps and whistles like strange tropical birds.

The bear's roaring rushed back upstream.

Meanwhile the Stonekin's cries moved that way as well.

Gaunt waited three breaths. She broke the nearby ice with her boot and slithered down into the channel.

With luck and forewarning she reached bottom with nothing worse than cuts and scrapes. When her eyes adjusted to the dim blue light seeping down from the ceiling, she saw Bone leaning against brown frozen earth. A scent of raw, bloody meat, preserved by the cold air, assaulted her nose.

Upstream and around a bend, she could hear more ursine growling.

There followed many human cries of anger and alarm. These became screams of terror.

"I thought you were going to stay up," Bone hissed.

She shoved him forward. "Just move, Bone," she whispered. "At least you'll have the advantage of going faster than I."

Wincing he said, "*I've* got the sprained ankle; you'll find that difficult."

"I can move quite slowly in a crisis."

Nevertheless they both advanced with quiet dispatch, staying close. Sounds of chewing and moaning followed them down the riverbed.

Gaunt noticed strange markings on the walls, made from some rusty-looking pigment. Again a bloody smell filled her nostrils. Wonder made her daring, and she spoke. "What are these?"

"I was hoping you'd miss them. They're what truly made me swear. The bear's arrival just made the oath economical."

They were paintings of great simplicity, yet they captured an air of

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grace and fluid motion. These were hunting scenes, showing various animals of the north — muskoxen, and marmots, and mammoths. She had seen cave art with a similar look in remote spots on Swanisle.

But some of the bipedal shapes she'd first taken for hunters seemed to lack weapons. Indeed, Gaunt had the impression they were fleeing along with the other animals. It slowly came to Gaunt that those bipeds who did bear arms were rather massive sorts, with clawed hands and extended ears.

It also came to her that the sounds behind them had ceased. She glanced behind — and immediately ducked.

A spear stabbed the wall, impaling one of the scrawny paintings of human prey.

She beheld a huge white bear nearly filling the channel. It seemed astounding that anything so tall should stand on two feet. The *Tornarssuk* clutched a bloody knife carved from bone or caribou antler, with a blade as long as Gaunt's forearm. Its bulk glittered with clumps of ice, as though it had deliberately soaked and frozen its fur before battle. Gore stained the ice.

The bear wore a mask: the tanned, sliced, and stretched head of a human, secured with twine.

The *Tornarssuk* did not roar. It did worse. It smiled. Its teeth had scarlet stains.

Gaunt held her ground. She was too shocked to do much else.

Bone was at least prepared for the sight. He threw a rock.

He scored a hit to the heart. But the stone bounced uselessly off the armor of ice and matted fur.

The sound did break Gaunt's paralysis. She managed to stumble backward as the *Tornarssuk* swiped at where she'd been. Cold air from the swing struck her face; the scent of human entrails churned her stomach.

The scent proved too distracting. She tripped, sprawling upon the silt.

With a snarl Bone leapt onto the bear's back.

"Mine!" she heard him screech. "*My* food!" She didn't pause to wonder which morsel he meant. She reached into her pack and pulled out *Mashed Rags Bound in Dead Cow.*

"You use tools," she shouted, opening it wide. "Paint symbols. *Can you read?*"

The bear sniffed and stared at the pages, ignoring the madman trying to chew it to death. It dropped its knife and bellowed.

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It seized Bone and threw him overhead at Gaunt. Poet and thief went down in a heap.

The bear turned and loped up the tunnel, fast as a cat.

Before the *Tornarssuk* left Gaunt's sight, she saw it snatch up the cub, which had been trailing a few paces back. The adult bear nuzzled its offspring. There was no sign of meaningless death afflicting either.

"It seems you can't read," Gaunt groaned, "Not quite. Not yet. This horror can't claim you. And yet...."

The bear snarled once more, as if in repudiation of humanity and all its works. Both white shapes turned away.

And yet you feel it. This book would destroy your kind along with ours. Did you sense that?

Or did you glimpse what we humans are capable of? And fear what you might become?

Bone moaned beside her. "What...what was I doing?"

"Succumbing," she said. She helped him to sit up. "And yet you turned that to our advantage."

"Damn the Stonekin," Bone said. "If I must cannibalize someone, let it be them."

She wrinkled her nose, gave him a bleak smile. "I think the *Tornarssuk's* family had first pick."

They sat like that for a long, cold while, breathing hard. They leaned close together for warmth.

Bone gently set his teeth upon Gaunt's ear.

Their eyes met, and their bodies separated.

"We must keep moving," Bone said, looking away. He rose stiffly and shambled downstream, away from the charnel reek and Gaunt's gaze.

THEY WALKED the riverbed beneath the ceiling of moonlit ice. The painted scenes dwindled in frequency as the light dimmed. After the moon set, they continued through the night, feeling their way along the passage.

Gaunt kept behind Bone, several paces back now. She did not want to blame him for the new chill between them. But such thoughts nipped at her like the throbbing of her hand. *It was Bone who stole the book, when first we met. Perhaps that awakened it, and otherwise it would have lain*

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dormant on its forgotten shelf. Had I not met him, the world might be safe. I might have had children. I might....

She realized she was asking herself when to do as Bone asked: slay him and proceed alone.

Not now.

Don't be weak. After all the harm he's caused....

Not now!

At last her reverie was broken by fresh air and a tang of salt upon her tongue.

They stumbled into the open on a starlit rocky shore, a gentle surf lapping near their feet, a whistling wind chilling their faces. They camped amid boulders, exhausted, gambling that nothing would pounce from passage, sea, or sky. Late in the morning they rose to survey grim rocky hills southward and a vast bay of deep blue water ahead.

The bay stretched from the dark, star-flecked west to the pink, cirrus-traced east. It was choked with thousands of small islands of floating ice, like fragments of drifting crystal. No more than a mile or two offshore, the fragments merged into a sheet of pack ice beneath swirling blue-gray thunderheads. The sheet seemed to crawl with weird white shapes, like the horns and claws of frozen demons.

"The World's Rim," Gaunt said, excitement heating her voice, even now. "Krumwheezle's sources described a calm narrow sea, freezing over as it kisses the void."

Bone pointed to a dark lip of coastline. "It appears the ice touches land at that point. Let's go."

They passed an old slaughter pit covered with thousands of clean bones, near an irregular man-shaped shadow cast by piled boulders. In the cold dry air the scent of raw meat remained.

Bone came to a halt. Pebbles spilled into the hollow, making a sound like tinkling glass. "The Old People," he said quietly, "scared caribou to this place with the shadow of the cairn. Here also they brought the walrus to carve. Children sang happily of meat. This was before the change, before the Hunger Stones transformed some of the People into the first Stonekin."

"Bone?"

The thief shut his eyes. "Something I heard from the Stone. This was always a hard land, but not always haunted. It changed long ago. The land

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shifted and the bay became sheltered. The ice crept over the abyss. And something from the abyss crept in."

He opened his eyes and gestured. "Look. Hunger Stones."

Far out along the peninsula, Gaunt saw little gray bumps like tiny warts. "But there are dozens!"

"Yes. And I know they are calling to Stonekin across the arctic. I know, because they also call to me."

They passed between the huge Hunger Stones that flanked their path like a granite honor guard. The wind hummed down the aisle like the distant chorus of an ancient play. But Gaunt heard nothing from the Stones themselves. She almost wished she could, for she saw Bone trembling with their influence.

Each time he tensed anew, a part of her demanded she kill Bone now, before his will broke.

Finally, to silence that part, she squeezed his hand. Although the cut in her palm ached, she gripped long enough for a little of Bone's warmth to soothe her numb skin. He nodded in silence.

Just after noon they passed the last Hunger Stones and reached a snowy slope descending to the ice. So thoroughly snow-clad was the ice that it looked like a particularly flat extension of the land. Only the milky, fractured edges of the sheet, a mile off on either side, gave away the truth.

The sun cast golden reflections upon their road north, making it seem a royal road into the stormy darkness. In the quiet beauty of this place, in what might be termed the ultimate part of Penultima Thule, Bone spoke for the first time in hours.

"You came for me," said Bone. "At Stonemouth. And at the riverbed."

"You'd have done the same."

"I'm not so sure. I was proud of you, you know, when you fled Stonemouth. Thought I'd finally trained you to be properly selfish. Yet you came back."

"There's more than one kind of selfishness." Gaunt paused to look around her at the bright, silent margin of the Earth. "I came back for you. But I selfishly want you in my life, and nowhere else. I've come all this way to save us, and perhaps everything. But that quest also gives me an ironclad excuse to see all this."

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She smiled, and Bone said, "I have never seen you so beautiful," and Gaunt, haggard, famished, wounded, saw her own spirit reflected in his face, and knew it was true.

That would do, she thought, in place of the ordinary words of love.

But her next thought was, *Now he is fully distracted — you'll never get a better chance to strike.*

She shook it off, took his hand, led him onto the ice.

The howls of the Stonekin soon followed.

Fearing their pursuit but also their footing, they hiked Rimward.

Here at last must be Ultima Thule, the land the cartographers forbore to mention, for it was no proper land at all. It was a place of strange silences, punctuated by the odd moaning wind. Sculpted by that wind the ice bore low wavy ridges, like ripples in a giant's white tablecloth cast over the bones of dragons. Sometimes there were delicate growths atop the ridges, like diamond candelabras. They tinkled and collapsed as Gaunt and Bone's pickaxes struck nearby.

Once a jagged path of dark water crossed their path, smoking at the edges like a river of the fabled underworld. There was nothing for it but to jump, the floes creaking beneath them. Elsewhere dark blue troughs indicated places where floes had recently fused. These grew thinner and rarer as the pair walked on.

As the afternoon ebbed, the expanse of ice widened to either side, and the travelers could no longer see open water. Dark clouds choked the blue sky overhead. Mist and shadow hid the horizon. The way grew rougher. There were circular pits filled with crystalline spears shining wickedly in the reddening light. Ice rose in ridges resembling piles of white boulders, or rounded hills.

Sometimes these formations bore glistening mouths with icicle teeth.

As with the Hungry Stones, Bone tensed beside the mouths. Gaunt's hand tensed upon her pickaxe. But Bone mastered himself and hiked on.

The dark, pressing sky, the white landscape, and the stabbing cold — these were besieging things. They drove Gaunt to burrow deeper into her clothing, sent her mind down into strange reverie. *You stand upon water,*

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she thought. *Nothing but frozen water upon liquid water. Or,* her mind continued relentlessly, *you have already crossed to where the ice overhangs nothing at all. You are at the limits of the Earth, Persimmon Gaunt. You were not meant to be here.*

Now there came a sound like distant thunder or the working of infernal machines somewhere miles north.

"The ice," Bone muttered, looking like a true mad prophet with his distant gaze, the weight of the pack upon his shoulders, and the white tangle of frozen breath upon his beard. "The winds of the Rim fracture it, causing plates to buckle and shift and fall."

"You learned this at Stonemouth?"

"I learned it now," he said, "from the mouths in the ice."

Gaunt bit her lip for comfort — and so she could feel something. "If so...throwing the book over the edge might be suicide after all."

"Worse, we could be sealed away inside a fissure, as far from our goal as if we still sipped tea at Krumwheezle's. We must be cautious."

That advice comes late, she thought.

Fresh howls came from behind, but still she could see no one beyond the southward ridges. They kept going.

As the sun set to the southwest, casting a pall like blood over the clouds and the surface underfoot, a fine mist arose. It made the land and even Bone indistinct, mere shadows in a scarlet haze. Gaunt could still see her own feet clearly, though — and the ice below.

Indeed, the ice grew so mirror-like that Gaunt could see herself, Bone beside her, stumbling relentlessly on. The need to spot surface irregularities anchored her gaze, and she often watched her reflection watching her.

It seemed to Gaunt that her reflection winked.

Distracted, she chanced upon a thinner region of ice, which bent and creaked beneath her weight. She stumbled. Her face plunged to within an inch of her reflection.

It smirked.

"No rest for thieves," Bone said, hauling her upright.

She nodded as if sleepwalking, not trusting her own perceptions. She looked around and saw only a rosy haze. Were there shadows moving behind? Again, she could only trust herself enough to stay on her feet. She

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wanted to say something to Bone, but somehow the mist and silence made him seem miles, not inches, away.

She looked down, and saw Bone's reflection leer at her own. Meanwhile Bone himself was scanning the land.

Before Gaunt could react, the mirror-Bone leapt upon her reflection, so vividly that Gaunt herself flinched and struggled for balance.

Her reflection stumbled. It seemed the mirror-Gaunt tried to escape but was betrayed by her own terror.

Gaunt's stomach clenched as she watched the image of her lover gnawing the mirror-Gaunt's throat. Blood spattered upward, cutting off her view. The last thing she saw was the mirror-Bone choking to death, having gorged too greedily. Red covered the ice.

"Bone? Imago?" She tore her gaze away. Her real love watched the mist behind them.

"We've company," he said.

She looked and this time saw many tiny dark silhouettes.

"They," she managed to say, "are not our only worry. Our own reflections haunt us."

"That is true," her own voice answered from the north.

THEY TURNED and beheld themselves.

Like a drawn curtain, the mist cleared to an extent of about five paces. On the far side of that clearing stood the mirror-Gaunt and the mirror-Bone — no longer trapped within the ice but standing atop it. Gaunt spied a bit of glint about the duplicates, a slightly blue complexion to each. The mirror-Gaunt's throat was whole, and the mirror-Bone's lips unblooded. But the ice beneath was sanguine as a royal carpet.

"I am annoyed," said the true Imago Bone. "I own little save my uniqueness. I put a high value on it."

"As I do mine," said his duplicate. The voice sounded alike, if more frosty.

"What are you," demanded Gaunt, "truly? Do not hide behind mists and reflections. What Being commands you?"

"We are," said the mirror-Gaunt, "what will make you *not*. When things encounter their opposites, are not both negated?"

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"Why make us *not*," Bone asked, "when we all could simply live?" He waved his hand grandly. "Let us divide the world. You may have everything north of here."

"You have limited understanding," said the mirror-Bone. "*Not* is a condition superior to life. It is purer. No hurt. No shame. No fear." It reached into its pack and pulled forth a duplicate of *Mashed Rags Bound in Dead Cow*.

"No chance," said Bone. He snatched out the true tome.

Something in the reflections' cool voices, however, warned Gaunt. On instinct she lunged and grasped the true book, preventing Bone from opening it.

Wordlessly, Bone nodded. He still trusted her, even if she couldn't fully trust him.

Slowly, using the corners of their eyes, they looked up at their counterparts.

Their reflections' book was still closed.

"So?" Gaunt demanded. "Open it."

"Open yours," goaded mirror-Bone.

"No chance," Bone said, and stashed the tome away. And now Gaunt was certain that opening their own book would have reflected the curse back upon them. She suspected their pointless deaths would have resembled the bloody scene she'd witnessed in the ice.

"You can't," Bone said, "can you? The book is a power beyond your own, or you'd have struck us down. Do I have the pleasure of addressing the power behind the Stones?"

"I am that power," said the mirror-Bone and the mirror-Gaunt in unison. "The God Who Is Not."

"If it is a pleasure," added the mirror-Gaunt coolly, "that is your affair."

"Oblivion awaits you here," said the mirror-Bone.

"Oblivion pursues," Gaunt observed. "And we have an errand."

"You must not proceed," said the mirror-Bone.

"Why is that?"

"Your errand," said the mirror-Gaunt, "will destroy me."

Gaunt shared another look with Bone. The thief said, "In all candor, that possibility had not occurred to us. You are vulnerable to the book?"

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"The book destroys creatures of mortal consciousness," said the mirror-Bone bleakly, "and I am not a god."

"But you just said — " Bone began.

"I am *The God Who Is Not*," interrupted mirror-Gaunt. "Therefore I am *not* a god. But were I a god, I would be the god of *not*."

Bone made a helpless gesture at Gaunt.

Gaunt said, "Your metaphysics are your own business. But know this: a wizard informed us the book will end the whole world, given time."

"He spoke truly," said mirror-Gaunt. "Yet to perish alongside the Earth would be mere oblivion. It is preferable to my destiny should the book pass beyond the ice, and encounter me directly."

"How can the book destroy what is *not*?" Gaunt wondered aloud.

Both icy doppelgängers stared. Then they leaned back simultaneously and laughed. Their mirth was like the groaning and creaking and shattering of ice. The sound filled the cold expanse.

Howls and hoots rose from behind, in answer. The Stonekin knew where to find their prey.

Bone grimaced, raised his pickaxe, and with merciless precision hacked the doppelgängers into fragments.

As they came to pieces the duplicates lost the pink of their flesh, the brown of their furs, and became simply pieces of ice. The surface beneath, however, remained blood-red.

"They might have said more," Gaunt said.

"I hate the ranting of cosmic forces," Bone said.

Gaunt looked behind them. She had the impression the shadows were running. "We're out of time."

Bone nodded, as if he expected no better. "How much farther, do you think?"

"According to the sources, we should encounter places where the stars shine up through the ice. But we've found none." If possible, she felt even colder as she spoke. She looked toward the Rim, into a wall of mist.

She looked over her shoulder at the charging shadows.

Last she looked down at the field of blood.

"May I play a hunch?"

"You're welcome to play a harp at this point."

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She brought her axe down upon the red ice. Bone shrugged and joined her. They hacked again and again.

The crimson cleared.

All around the little white quarry they'd created there lay a field of dimly shining stars, glinting beneath ten or so inches of ice.

"It was no coincidence the entity attacked us here," Gaunt said. "It meant to distract us."

Bone snatched the book and dropped it beside him. "Let's assume good luck."

"You realize, *good luck* could kill us just as sure as bad."

He grinned, something of his old self awakening. "We are thieves. Even a prolonged thieving life is a stolen, golden moment, flickering like torchlight. If it gutters out here, so be it."

"Speak for yourself. I'm a poet. I will live forever."

And so they attacked the ice as if it — after all the night angels and sorcerers, all the sentient bees and embodied sorrows — was the last fell creature they must fight together. And perhaps it was literally true: for the ice trembled like the skin of a living thing, and cracks formed around their feet. And as it tore and screeched, it found a voice.

I was the oblivion at World's Rim, and all was empty and good. Then the icy mirror formed above this span. I stared upward and saw myself staring downward. I, the abyss, gazed into myself.

"Keep going!" Gaunt shouted, as Bone wavered.

The cracks widened all around them. It seemed to Gaunt that the three largest fissures beside her offered glimpses into other times and places, past, present, and future. As she hacked she beheld ancient sorcerers of Swanisle sacrificing humans atop megaliths, and old Empress Nayne of the Eldshore slicing down foes. She saw kleptomancers of Palmary and outcasts of Serpenttooth plotting in the present. She saw strange armies of the future warring with weapons that leveled mountains, their banners celebrating faiths and ideologies and creeds incomprehensible; yet somehow Gaunt understood all these forces, whatever their differences, served the cause of *not*.

(Once she saw a boy with her hair and Bone's eyes, laughing in silk robes upon a litter, barking commands to cowled men with serrated shining swords. She flinched away from that last vision.)

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They kept hacking. But Bone was slow, distracted.

I grew aware. I was a god, yet not a god. I am the God Who Is Not. When you think of the bleakness at the top of the world, you think of me. When cold thoughts lick your skull, when your eyes meet the blankness at the edge of everything, you're touched by me. When you devour what you love, you partake of me.

Between axe-strokes, Gaunt heard the roars of the Stonekin.

Do not cast your book into me! It will destroy me. And to destroy a Not is to make a Something. I do not wish to be Something! I do not know what that will be! I am afraid. You should be as well!

"We are!" shouted Gaunt.

"Gaunt," screamed Bone. "I cannot...." And terrible hunger in his face, he lunged at her.

She had one instant to choose: strike at him, or strike at the ice.

She chose the ice.

She broke through.

An inky gap appeared in the white, and a vortex was born, sucking the air above down into the void.

Now Bone was upon her. He tore away her axe, and her glove came with it. He tossed both aside, and she heard a clatter and hum as the axe skittered within the pit, spun by the whirlwind.

She stared into his eyes. "It's done!" she cried. "It's done. Fight it!" She raised her hands.

He lifted his own axe, shuddering. His eyes locked on her right hand. Its palm was swollen and dark.

He brought his axe down upon the ice.

"Hold onto me," he said.

The wind tore at them, tugging them toward the hole. But for now the axe blade held.

The book, free upon the ice, slithered toward the gap, shot upward. It billowed open, swirling within the vortex, revealing the spidery dark flourishes of its text.

But poet and thief had already pressed their faces to the ice. They heard cries and gurgles as their pursuit arrived. They heard horrible tearing sounds and spattering impacts. And the wind howled louder.

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There came a dull series of *thumps*, and the wind's groaning grew dim.

Slowly Gaunt looked up.

She and Bone lay at the margin of a pile of fur-clad corpses. The bodies of the Stonekin had temporarily plugged the gap. At the top lay the headman of Stonemouth, his crystal tooth glinting red. Bone's lost pickaxe, its blades scarlet, rose from the headman's chest.

Of *Mashed Rags Bound in Dead Cow* there was no sign.

Gaunt touched Bone's shoulder.

"Time to run?" he mumbled into the ice.

"Yes," she said. "Time to run."

In fact they couldn't quite, but scampered and slid as the sun faded from sight and the clouds shone with nacreous moonlight.

A groan rose behind, expanding into the sound of shattering ice.

Somehow they reached the bridge to land. They scampered like lunatics beneath the hidden moon, every bit of ice between them and Penultima Thule an affront to their sanity.

Once they passed an ice-ridge with a fang-filled mouth. As they struggled by, the mouth hissed and spat and crumbled. Its icicle fangs scattered across their path in a writhing, serpentine pattern. The remnants tinkled underfoot.

Now *Boom* came a sound like a bloated thunderstorm, and boulder-sized ice fragments fell from the sky. Water surged behind them and the bridge fragmented.

Soon they crouched upon an ice island no larger than Krumwheezle's sitting room, screaming. The waves shoved them south.

WHEN THEY RECOVERED their wits, they stumbled like toddlers onto a muddy shoreline. Behind them sounded a roar like a thousand flooding rivers.

At that moment, however, a strange glow caressed the land. In the eerie light they beheld the bay rushing into the void, until finally all that remained was a thin ribbon of moonlit water within a muddy canyon. Beyond, where the ultimate ice had reigned, the convulsion had shredded the clouds, and bright stars flanked a ridge of crazily jagged hills. Volcanic flame spouted at intervals.

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But something drew their eyes from the hellish scene.

Rising through the dark above the Rim was a serpentine shape woven of light. It shimmered eerie pinks and greens and yellows and purples. It looked as tall as a mountain range, thin as a wedding veil. Stars flickered through its form. It coiled through the northern sky with the manner of a lazy tiger, then launched itself to zenith like a gazelle escaping doom. It was like a river, like an emperor's robe, like a child's breath.

"What is that," Bone murmured.

"That is Something," said Gaunt.

The Something in the sky appeared to notice them. A thrill of fear ran from the crown of Gaunt's skull to her smallest toes. And she thought, *If I die, at least I saw this.*

The thing in the sky, with an air of humor, twitched a little at one rosy fringe.

An object spun down from the heavens, and landed with a splat in the mud. It was the savaged cover of a book. It sheltered only tatters of parchment. Down it tumbled, into the lake that marked the grave of Ultima Thule.

"The book couldn't endure," Gaunt guessed. "It was a disease of meaninglessness. And now, despite itself, it's caused Something to be." She beheld her right hand, and the dark swelling was gone. There remained only a thin cut, like a new lifeline. "The curse is bankrupt," she said.

"Go!" Bone called to the lights in the northern sky. "Enjoy your existence! Do Something. We'll do likewise."

The Something did not respond, but gradually undulated its way to the east, lighting unknown mountains before sliding from view.

"What *will* we do, Bone?" Gaunt asked, looking after it.

"Hard to predict. But I believe it involves going south."

They climbed the coastal slope, away from ultimate things. They found the gallery of Hungry Stones. Each boulder was now a pile of rubble, and the quartz teeth of the former maws lay in sinuous trails as if in imitation of the Something. Bone paused among the remains and looked a long while at the sky, where the new being had come and gone.

"There's no hunger," he said. "Only wonder."

"I'm glad of that," Gaunt said. She added, "The sentiment is not wholly selfless."

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"I'm sure I'll be ravenous in time." He stooped to gather a dusting of quartz, then brushed his hands clean. "But it will be ordinary hunger. I will not dream of devouring all. And neither, I think, will the Something."

He rose, studied her face, said finally, "I saw a child."

"I too," she said.

"It was ours. Perhaps I am transformed as well. Perhaps we can...."

"Yes," she said, exhilaration and fear so close within her as to become the same thing. "But Bone...he was cold and cruel, like the God Who Was Not."

He turned to her. "He? But it was a girl. She rode a horse, unladylike, grinning at the ocean. She was like the new thing in the sky."

She let go a long breath. "They could both be our future."

"Or neither," Bone said. "I could still be cursed. Or we could have a different child. Or none."

"And is that what you wish, Bone? No child?"

He smiled, shook his head. "I've blinked into the abyss. I've seen Not become Something. I want the future, Persimmon Gaunt. And I hope the future has your eyes."

And that is how the Aurora came to be, my child.

And that, in a sense, is how you came to be as well.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Creepers, by David Morrell, CDS Books, 2005, $24.95.

SOME TIME ago (in 2002) I reviewed a couple of the late Richard Laymon's books including *Night in the Lonesome October* (CD Publications, 2001). I mentioned that what intrigued me about Laymon's work was how he would set up a rather plausible scenario (in this case, a young man who took to walking the streets at night because of a broken heart) and then slowly let the story get darker and weirder.

I'm pretty sure almost everybody has walked a city's streets at night — I mean *late* at night, during those no-man's-land hours between two and four. It's an interesting time to be out. The most familiar neighborhoods take on a whole different, almost otherwordly air. Now, we don't necessarily go on to do what Laymon's character does, which is prowl through empty houses — or perhaps just a house where the residents are asleep. Not to hurt them, or to steal anything. Just to be there.

But we might have thought about it.

(And let me add the obvious here, that doing so is against the law, and it's just as much an invasion of privacy as it is to enter a private home with more nefarious purposes in mind.)

But it's an interesting conceit and made for a powerful book.

Now something else many of you reading this might have considered — in passing, of course — is the intrigue of an abandoned public building. A hotel. A mall. An office complex. Boarded up, and often protected from intrusion by security patrols because of insurance risks.

Going through a building such as that is like being an archaeologist, although one whose field of study is definitely more contemporary than what we would normally consider with the job.

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These people consider themselves urban explorers, or infiltrators. Or, to use a slang term, creepers, which probably arose from how, in criminal parlance, "breaking & entering" can also be referred to as "creeping."

So that's the jump-off point with Morrell's new novel. His band of urban explorers includes four experienced creepers and one journalist who is writing a piece on the experience. Before they enter the abandoned hotel, the leader of the creepers emphasizes their rule of thumb which is that you leave everything the way it was when you got there. You take out your trash. You don't break things. You even pee in a bottle and bring that out with you.

Creeping is a dangerous hobby. Floors can collapse. Ditto walls and ceilings. There can be, and probably are, noxious molds and who knows what other toxic remnants. And you're breaking the law and could find yourself in jail before the end of the night.

But back to Morrell's novel. Into the building the five go. The first part of the book is a wonderful description of the experience, leavened with strong characterizations and the growing mystery of who exactly the journalist is, since he seems far more capable that your run-of-the-mill pencil pusher. But the pace builds slowly, and perfectly.

Okay, there's a two-page hint of more to come, right at the beginning of the book — you know, along the lines of "Months later, he still would not be able to tolerate being in a room with closed doors" — but that's an author's trick, one that gets used when you know the beginning of the book has to be a little slow to make the payoff work, but you want to make sure people realize they're going to get that payoff.

When things start to go wrong, they begin simply, innocently, with many explanations. But the tension builds, nobody turns out to be quite who we thought they were, and trust me, you're in for the ride of your life.

The book contains a fascinating "Author's Note" at the end, which puts the whole concept into personal perspective for the author. It's as riveting, in its own way, as the story that came before it.

A last thought here before we move on: I wish there'd never been a movie made of Morrell's book *First Blood* — or at least not the one that was made. I know the book will always exist, and we can simply read it if we don't care for the

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film, but I'm afraid that too many people will judge Morrell's work by that film, and not read the books. Or they'll love the movie, then read him and be disappointed because his work is so much more thoughtful than that film was.

You do know that, in the book, the character dies at the end of *First Blood*, right?

Of course, then we run into the thorny issue of Morrell writing a sequel to *First Blood* and ignoring that fact...all of which is food for another column, perhaps. At the moment, I just want to say that *Creepers* is a wonderful, spooky, intriguing read.

River Rats, by Caroline Stevermer, Magic Carpet Books, 2005, $6.95.

Regular readers of this column will already have heard me wax enthusiastically about reissue programs on more than one occasion, though usually it's in reference to some spiffy special addition with all sorts of bells and whistles attached to what is really the point of a book: the story inside those pages. And yes, I do enjoy those fine examples of the bookmaker's art, for their aesthetic value as much as for the story.

But story remains what it's all about, and the packaging — exotic bindings, the plethora of illustrations, notes, introductions, and afterwords — simply isn't as important. Which is why I'm also delighted with plain, affordable mass-market reissues such as the book in hand.

With the vast wealth of books available, it's easy for little treasures to slip through the cracks. I'm familiar with Stevermer's work — both on her own and in collaboration with Patricia Wrede — but *River Rats* (originally published in 1992) slipped past my radar. And maybe yours, too.

It's set along the Mississippi, in a near future following some undefined global disaster that included a terrible epidemic. At some point before the story, a docked steamboat was being used as an orphanage. When it's abandoned because of the approach of a large storm, four of the charges stay behind, cast off, and start a new life on the polluted waters of the Mississippi. They're joined by a couple more kids, one of whom happens to be an expert in engines.

They call themselves the River Rats and ply a trade up and down the river: hauling freight, delivering mail, and occasionally, perform-

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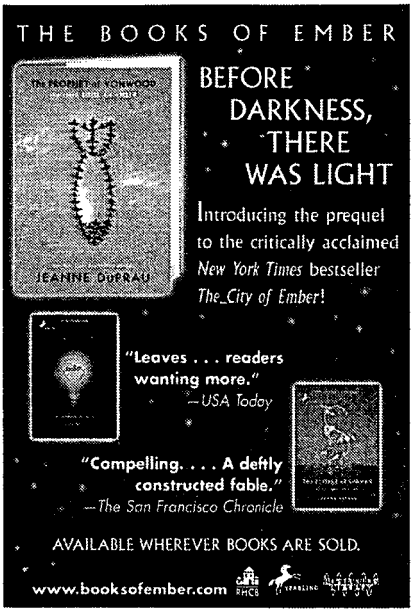
ing a concert of rock music that lasts until their batteries lose their charge.

And they have a rule: no passengers.

Of course they break that rule as soon as the book opens (or we wouldn't have a story), with predictably disastrous results.

Fans of Terri Windling's *Bordertown* series should really enjoy this book. There aren't any elves, or magic, but it has a similar sensibility: fast-paced, youthful, thoughtful, with a delightful spice of rock'n'roll. While Stevermer doesn't explain the reason the world came to be the way it is in *River Rats*, she *has* thought out the ramifications, from the hillbilly redneck family that owns one town, to the deserted city infested with a pack of Wild Boys and the secret of the passenger that the River Rats pick up.

This is a novel that really deserves its second chance on the book shelves.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Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Christopher Rowe has published short stories in Realms of Fantasy, Infinite Matrix, Swan Sister, *and* Trampoline, *and collected several tales in the chapbook* Bittersweet Creek and Other Stories, *but he's best known for "The Voluntary State," a short story that earned several award nominations after it appeared in* Sci Fiction *two years ago. He and Gwenda Bond produce the ever-interesting magazine* Say...

A native Kentuckian currently living in Lexington, Mr. Rowe offers up a challenging vision of America in his F&SF *debut.*

Another Word for Map Is Faith

By Christopher Rowe

THE LITTLE DRIVERS THREW baggage down from the top of the bus and out from its rusty undercarriage vaults. This was the last stop. The road broke just beyond here, a hundred yards short of the creek.

With her fingertip, Sandy traced the inked ridge northeast along the map, then rolled the soft leather into a cylinder and tucked it inside her vest. She looked around for her pack and saw it tumbled together with the other Cartographers' luggage at the base of a catalpa tree. Lucas and the others were sorting already, trying to lend their gear some organization, but the stop was a tumult of noise and disorder.

The high country wind shrilled against the rush of the stony creek; disembarkees pawed for their belongings and tried to make sense of the delicate, coughing talk of the unchurched little drivers. On the other side of the valley, across the creek, the real ridge line — *the geology*, her father would have said disdainfully — stabbed upstream. By her rough estimation it had rolled perhaps two degrees off the angle of its writ mapping.

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Lucas would determine the exact discrepancy later, when he extracted his instruments from their feather and wax paper wrappings.

"Third world *bullshit*," Lucas said, walking up to her. "The transit services people from the university paid these little schemers before we ever climbed onto that deathtrap, and now they're asking for the fare." Lucas had been raised near the border, right outside the last town the bus had stopped at, in fact, though he'd dismissed the notion of visiting any family. His patience with the locals ran inverse to his familiarity with them.

"Does this count as the third world?" she asked him. "Doesn't there have to be a general for that? Rainforests and steel ruins?"

Lucas gave his half-grin — not quite a smirk — acknowledging her reduction. Cartographers were famous for their willful ignorance of social expressions like politics and history.

"Carmen paid them, anyway," he told her as they walked toward their group. "Probably out of her own pocket, thanks be for wealthy dilettantes."

"Not fair," said Sandy. "She's as sharp as any student in the seminar, and a better hand with the plotter than most post-docs, much less grad students."

Lucas stopped. "I hate that," he said quietly. "I hate when you separate yourself — go out of your way to remind me that you're a teacher and I'm a student."

Sandy said the same thing she always did. "I hate when you forget it."

Against all odds, they were still meeting the timetable they'd drawn up back at the university, all those months ago. The bus pulled away in a cloud of noxious diesel fumes an hour before dark, leaving its passengers in a muddy camp dotted with fire rings but otherwise marked only by a hand-lettered sign pointing the way to a primitive latrine.

The handful of passengers not connected with Sandy's group had melted into the forest as soon as they'd found their packages. ("Salt and sugar," Lucas had said, "They're backwoods people — hedge shamans and survivalists. There's every kind of lunatic out here.") This left Sandy to stand by and pretend authority while the Forestry graduate student whose services she'd borrowed showed them all how to set up their camps.

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Carmen, naturally, had convinced the young man to demonstrate tent pitching to the others using her own expensive rig as an example. The olive-skinned girl sat in a camp chair folding an onionskin scroll back on itself and writing in a wood-bound notebook while the others struggled with canvas and willow poles.

"Keeping track of our progress?" Sandy asked, easing herself onto the ground next to Carmen.

"I have determined," Carmen replied, not looking up, "that we have traveled as far from a hot water heater as is possible and still be within Christendom."

Sandy smiled, but shook her head, thinking of the most remote places she'd ever been. "Davis?" she asked, watching her student's reaction to mention of that unholy town.

Carmen, a Californian, shuddered but kept her focus. "There's a naval base in San Franciso, sí? They've got all the amenities, surely."

Sandy considered again, thinking of cold camps in old mountains, and of muddy jungle towns ten days' walk from the closest bus station.

"Cape Canaveral," she said.

With quick, precise movements, Carmen folded a tiny desktop over her chair's arm and spread her scroll out flat. She drew a pair of calipers out from her breast pocket and took measurements, pausing once to roll the scroll a few turns. Finally, she gave a satisfied smile and said, "Only fifty-five miles from Orlando. We're almost twice that from Louisville."

She'd made the mistake Sandy had expected of her. "But Orlando, Señorita Reyes, is Catholic. And we were speaking of Christendom."

A stricken look passed over her student's face, but Sandy calmed her with exaggerated conspiratorial looks left and right. "Some of your fellows aren't so liberal as I am, Carmen. So remember where you are. Remember *who* you are. Or who you're trying to become."

Another reminder issued, Sandy went to see to her own tent.

The Forestry student gathered their wood, brought them water to reconstitute their freeze-dried camp meals, then withdrew to his own tent far back in the trees. Sandy told him he was welcome to spend the evening around their fire — "You built it, after all," she'd said — but he'd made a convincing excuse.

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The young man pointed to the traveling shrine her students had erected in the center of their camp, pulling a wooden medallion from beneath his shirt. "That Christ you have over there, ma'am," he said. "He's not this one, is he?"

Sandy looked at the amulet he held, gilded and green. "What do you have there, Jesus in the Trees?" she asked, summoning all her professional courtesy to keep the amusement out of her voice. "No, that's not the Christ we keep. We'll see you in the morning."

They didn't, though, because later that night, Lucas discovered that the forest they were camped in wasn't supposed to be there at all.

HE'D FOUND an old agricultural map somewhere and packed it in with their little traveling library. Later, he admitted that he'd only pulled it out for study because he was still sulking from Sandy's clear signal he wouldn't be sharing her tent that night.

Sandy had been leading the rest of the students in some prayers and thought exercises when Lucas came up with his moldering old quarto. "Tillage," he said, not even bothering to explain himself before he'd foisted the book off on his nearest fellow. "All the acreage this side of the ridge line is supposed to be under tillage."

Sandy narrowed her eyes, more than enough to quiet any of her charges, much less Lucas. "What's he got there, Ford?" she asked the thin undergraduate who now held the book.

"Hmmmm?" said the boy; he was one of those who fell instantly and almost irretrievably into any text and didn't look up. Then, at an elbow from Carmen, he said, "Oh! This is..." He turned the book over in his hands, angled the spine toward one of the oil lamps and read, "This is *An Agricultural Atlas of Clark County, Kentucky.*"

"'County,'" said Carmen. "*Old* book, Lucas."

"But it's *writ*," said Lucas. "There's nothing superseding the details of it and it doesn't contradict anything else we brought about the error. Hell, it even confirms the error we came to correct." Involuntarily, all of them looked up and over at the apostate ridge.

"But what's this about tillage," Sandy said, giving him the opportunity to show off his find even if it was already clear to her what it must be.

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"See, these plot surveys in the appendices didn't get accounted for in the literature survey we're working from. The book's listed as a source, but only as a supplemental confirmation. It's not just the ridge that's wrong, it's the stuff growing down this side, too. We're supposed to be in grain fields of some kind down here in the flats, then it's pasturage on up to the summit line."

A minor find, sure, but Sandy would see that Lucas shared authorship on the corollary she'd file with the university. More importantly, it was an opportunity before the hard work of the days ahead.

"We can't do anything about the hillsides tonight, or any of the acreage beyond the creek," she told them. "But as for these glades here...."

It was a simple exercise. The fires were easily set.

In the morning, Sandy drafted a letter to the Dean of Agriculture while most of her students packed up the camp. She had detailed a few of them to sketch the corrected valley floor around them, and she'd include those visual notes with her instructions to the Dean, along with a copy of the writ map from Lucas's book.

"Read that back to me, Carmen," she said, watching as Lucas and Ford argued over yet another volume, this one slim and bound between paper boards. It was the same back country cartographer's guide she'd carried on her own first wilderness forays as a grad student. They'd need its detailed instructions on living out of doors without the Tree Jesus boy to help them.

"'By my hand,'" read Carmen, "'I have caused these letters to be writ. Blessings on the Department of Agriculture and on you, Dean. Blessings on Jesus Sower, the Christ you serve.'"

"Skip to the end, dear." Sandy had little patience for the formalities of academic correspondence, and less for the pretense at holiness the Agriculturalists made with their little fruiting Christ.

"'So, then, it is seen in these texts that Cartography has corrected the error so far as in our power, and now the burden is passed to you and your brethren to complete this holy task, and return the land to that of Jesus' vision.'" Carmen paused. "Then you promise to remember the Dean in your prayers and all the rest of the politesse."

"Good. Everything observed. Make two copies and bring the official one to me for sealing when you're done."

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Carmen turned to her work and Sandy to hers. The ashen landscape extending up the valley was still except for some ribbons twisting in a light breeze. The ribbons were wax sealed to the parchment banner her students had set at first light, the new map of the valley floor drawn in red and black against a cream background. Someone had found the blackened disc of the Forestry student's medallion and leaned it against the base of the banner's staff and Sandy wondered if it had been Carmen, prone to sentiment, or perhaps Lucas, prone to vague gestures.

By midmorning, the students had readied their gear for the march up the ridge line and Carmen had dropped Sandy's package for the university in the mailbox by the bus stop. Before they hoisted their backpacks, though, Sandy gathered them all for fellowship and prayer.

"The gymnasiums at the University have made us fit enough for this task," and here she made a playful flex with her left arm, earning rolled eyes from Lucas and a chuckle from the rest. "The libraries have given us the woodscraft we need, and the chapels have given us the sustenance of our souls."

Sandy swept her arm north to south, indicating the ridge. "When I was your age, oh so long ago — " and a pause here for another ripple of laughter, acknowledgment of her dual status as youngest tenured faculty member at the university and youngest ordained minister in the curia. "When I was your age, I was blessed with the opportunity to go to the Northeast, traveling the lands beyond the Susquehanna, searching out error."

Sandy smiled at the memory of those times — *could they be ten years gone already*? "I traveled with men and women strong in the Lord, soldiers and scholars of God. There are many errors in the Northeast."

Maps so brittle with age that they would flake away in the cold winds of the Adirondack passes, so faded that only the mightiest of prayers would reveal Jesus' true intentions for His world.

"But none here in the heartlands of the Church, right? Isn't that what our parish priests told us growing up?" The students recognized that she was beginning to teach and nodded, murmured assent.

"Christians, there *is* error here. There is error right before our eyes!" Her own students weren't a difficult congregation to hook, but she was gratified nonetheless by the gleam she caught in most of their eyes, the calls, louder now, of "Yes!" and "I see it! I see the lie!"

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"I laid down my protractor, friends, I know exactly how far off north Jesus mapped this ridge line to lay," she said, sweeping her arm in a great arc, taking in the whole horizon, "And that ridge line sins by two degrees!"

"May as well be two *hundred*!" said Carmen, righteous.

Sandy raised her hand, stopped them at the cusp of celebration instead of loosing them. "Not yet," she said. "It's tonight. It's tonight we'll sing down the glory, tonight we'll make this world the way it was mapped."

The march up the ridge line did not go as smoothly as Sandy might have wished, but the delays and false starts weren't totally unexpected. She'd known Lucas — a country boy after all — would take the lead, and she'd guessed that he would dead-end them into a crumbling gully or two before he picked the right route through the brambles. If he'd been some kind of natural-born hunter he would never have found his way to the Lord, or to education.

Ford and his friends — all of them destined for lecture halls and libraries, not fieldwork — made the classic, the *predicted* mistake she'd specifically warned against in the rubric she'd distributed for the expedition. "If we're distributing six hundred pounds of necessities across twenty-two packs," she asked Ford, walking easily beside him as he struggled along a game trail, "How much weight does that make each of us responsible for?"

"A little over twenty-seven pounds, ma'am," he said, wheezing out the reply.

"And did you calculate that in your head like a mathematician or did you remember it from the syllabus?" Sandy asked. She didn't press too hard, the harshness of the lesson was better imparted by the straps cutting into his shoulders than by her words.

"I remembered it," Ford said. And because he really did have the makings of a great scholar and great scholars are nothing if not owners of their own errors, he added, "It was in the same paragraph that said not to bring too many books."

"Exactly," she said, untying the leather cords at the top of his pack and pulling out a particularly heavy looking volume. She couldn't resist looking at the title page before dropping it into her own pack.

"*Unchurched Tribes of the Chiapas Highlands: A Bestiary*. Think

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we'll make it to Mexico on this trip, Ford?" she asked him, teasing a little.

Ford's faced reddened even more from her attention than it had from the exertions of the climb. He mumbled something about migratory patterns, then leaned into the hike.

If most of the students were meeting their expectations of themselves and one another, then Carmen's sprightly, sure-footed bounding up the trail was a surprise to most. Sandy, though, had seen the girl in the gym far more frequently than the other students, most of whom barely met the minimum number of visits per week required by their advising committees. Carmen was as much an athlete as herself, and the lack of concern the girl showed about dirt and insects was refreshing.

So it was Carmen who summitted first, and it was she who was looking northeast with a stunned expression on her face when Sandy and Lucas reached the top side by side. Following Carmen's gaze, Lucas cursed and called for help in taking off his heavily laden pack before he began unrolling the oilcloth cases of his instruments.

Sandy simply pursed her lips and began a mental review of her assets: the relative strengths and weaknesses of her students, the number of days' worth of supplies they carried, the nature of the curia-designed instruments that Lucas exhibited a natural affinity for controlling. She began to nod. She'd marshaled more than enough strength for the simple tectonic adjustment they'd planned, and she could set her own unquestionable faith against this new challenge if it revealed any deficiencies among her students. She would make a show of asking their opinions, but she already knew that this was a challenge she could meet.

Ford finally reached the top of the ridge line, not so much climbing as stumbling to the rocky area where the others were gathering. Once he looked up and around, he said, "The survey team that found the error in the ridge's orientation, they didn't come up here."

"They were specifically scouting for projects that the university could handle," said Sandy. "If they'd been up here, they would have called in the Mission Service, not us."

Spread out below them, ringed in tilled fields and dusted with a scattering of wooden fishing boats, was an unmapped lake.

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Sandy set Ford and the other bookish scholars to cataloguing all of the texts they'd smuggled along so they could be integrated into her working bibliography. She hoped that one of them was currently distracted by waterways the way that Ford was distracted by fauna.

Lucas set their observation instruments on tripods in an acceptably devout semicircle and Sandy permitted two or three of the others to begin preliminary sight-line measurements of the lake's extent.

"It turns my stomach," said Lucas, peering through the brass tube of a field glass. "I grew up seeing the worst kind of blasphemy, but I could never imagine that anyone could do something like this."

"You need to work on that," said Sandy. Lucas was talking about the landscape feature crosshaired in the glass, a clearly artificial earthworks dam, complete with a retractable spillway. "Missionaries see worse every day."

Lucas didn't react. He'd never abandoned his ambition, even after she'd laughed him down. *Our sisters and brothers in the Mission Service,* she'd said with the authority that only someone who'd left that order could muster, *make up in the pretense of zeal what they lack in scholarship and access to the divine. Anyone can move a mountain with whips and shovels.*

The sketchers showed her their work, which they annotated with Lucas's count and codification of architectural structures, fence lines, and crops. "Those are corn cribs," he said. "That's a meeting house. That's a mill."

This was the kind of thing she'd told him he should concentrate on. The best thing any of them had to offer was the overlay of their own personal ranges of unexpected expertise onto the vast body of accepted Cartography. Lucas's barbaric background, Ford's holographic memory, Carmen's cultured scribing. Her own judgment.

"They're *marmotas*!" said Ford. They all looked up at where he'd been awkwardly turning the focus wheel on one of the glasses. "Like in my book!" He wasn't one to flash a triumphal grin, which Sandy appreciated. She assented to the line of inquiry with a nod and he hurried over to the makeshift shelf that some of his friends had been using to stack books while they wrote their list.

The unchurched all looked alike to Sandy, differing only in the details

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of their dress, modes of transportation, and to what extent the curia allowed interaction with them. In the case of the little drivers, for example, tacit permission was given for commercial exchange because of their ancient control of the bus lines. But she'd never heard of *marmotas*, and said so.

"They're called 'rooters' around here," said Lucas. "I don't know what Ford's on about. I've never heard of them having a lake, but they've always come into the villages with their vegetables, so far as I know."

"Not always," said Carmen. "There's nothing about any unchurched lineages in the glosses of the maps we're working from. They're as new as that lake."

Sandy recognized that they were in an educable moment. "Everybody come here, let's meet. Let's have a class."

The students maneuvered themselves into the flatter ground within the horseshoe of instruments, spreading blankets and pulling out notebooks and pens. Ford laid his bestiary out, a place marked about a third of the way through with the bright yellow fan of a fallen gingko leaf.

"Carmen's brought up a good point," said Sandy, after they'd opened with a prayer. "There's no Cartographical record of these diggers, or whatever they're called, along the ridge line."

"I don't think it matters, necessarily, though," said Carmen. "There's no record of the road up to the bus stop, either, or of Lucas's village. 'Towns and roads are thin scrims, and outside our purview.'"

Sandy recognized the quote as being from the autobiography of a radical cleric intermittently popular on campus. It was far from writ, but not heretical by any stretch of the imagination and, besides, she'd had her own enthusiasms for colorful doctrinal interpretations when she was younger. She was disappointed that Carmen would let her tendency toward error show so plainly to the others but let it pass, confident that one of the more conservative students would address it.

"Road building doesn't affect landscape?" asked Lucas, on cue. "The Mapmaker *used* road builders to cut canyons all over the continent. Ford, maybe Carmen needs to see the cutlines on your contour maps of the bus routes."

Before Ford, who was looking somewhat embarrassed by the exchange, could reply, Carmen said, "I'm not talking about the Mapmaker,

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Lucas, I'm talking about your *family*, back in the village we passed yesterday."

"Easy, Carmen," said Sandy. "We're getting off task here. The question at hand isn't *whether* there's error. The error is clear. We can feel the moisture of it on the breeze blowing up the hill right now." Time to shift directions on them, to turn them on the right path before they could think about it.

"The question," she continued, "is how much of it we plan to correct." Not *whether* they'd correct, don't leave that option for them. The debate she'd let them have was over the degree of action they'd take, not whether they'd take any at all.

The more sophisticated among them — Ford and Carmen sure, but even Lucas, to his credit — instantly saw her tack and looked at her with eyebrows raised. Then Lucas reverted to type and actually dared to say something.

"We haven't prepared for anything like this. That lake is more than a mile across at its broadest!"

"A mile across, yes," said Sandy, dismissively. "Carmen? What scale did you draw your sketch of the valley in?"

Carmen handed her a sheaf of papers. "24K to one. Is that all right?"

"Good, good," said Sandy. She smiled at Ford. "That's a conversion even I can do in my head. So...if I compare the size of the *dam* — " and she knitted her eyebrows, calculating. "If I compare the dam to the ridge, I see that the ridge we came to move is about three hundred times the larger."

Everyone began talking at once and at cross purposes. A gratifying number of the students were simply impressed with her cleverness and seemed relaxed, sure that it would be a simple matter now that they'd been shown the problem in the proper perspective. But Carmen was scratching some numbers in the dirt with the knuckle of her right index finger and Ford was flipping through the appendix of one of his books and Lucas...

Lucas stood and looked down over the valley. He wasn't looking at the lake and the dam, though, or even at the village of the unchurched creatures who had built it. He was looking to his right, down the eastern flank of the ridge they stood on, down the fluvial valley toward where, it

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suddenly occurred to Sandy, he'd grown up, toward the creek-side town they'd stopped in the day before.

Ford raised his voice above an argument he'd been having with two or three others. "Isn't there a question about what that much water will do to the topography downstream? I mean, I know hydrology's a pretty knotty problem, theologically speaking, but we'd have a clear hand in the erosion, wouldn't we? What if the floodwaters subside off ground that's come unwrit because of something that we did?"

"That *is* a knotty problem, Ford," said Sandy, looking Lucas straight in the eye. "What's the best way to solve a difficult knot?"

And it was Lucas who answered her, nodding. "Cut through it."

LATER, WHILE most of the students were meditating in advance of the ceremony, Sandy saw Carmen moving from glass to glass, making minute focusing adjustments and triangulating different views of the lake and the village. Every so often, she made a quick visual note in her sketchbook.

"It's not productive to spend too much time on the side effects of an error, you know," Sandy said.

Carmen moved from one instrument to the next. "I don't think it's all that easy to determine what's a side effect and what's...okay," she said.

Sandy had lost good students to the distraction she could see now in Carmen. She reached out and pivoted the cylinder down, so that its receiving lens pointed straight at the ground. "There's nothing to see down there, Carmen."

Carmen wouldn't meet her eye. "I thought I'd record — "

"Nothing to see, nothing to record. If you could go down and talk to them you wouldn't understand a word they say. If you looked in their little huts you wouldn't find anything redemptive; there's no cross hanging in the wall of the meeting house, no Jesus of the Digging Marmots. When the water is drained, we won't see anything along the lake bed but mud and whatever garbage they've thrown in off their docks. The lake doesn't have any secrets to give up. You know that."

"Ford's books — "

"Ford's books are by anthropologists, who are halfway to being witch

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doctors as far as most respectable scholars are concerned, and who keep their accreditation by dint of the fact that their field notes are good intelligence sources for the Mission Service. Ford reads them because he's got an overactive imagination and he likes stories too much — lots of students in the archive concentration have those failings. Most of them grow out of it with a little coaxing. Like Ford will, he's too smart not to. Just like *you're* too smart to backslide into your parents' religion and start looking for souls to save where there are no souls to be found."

Carmen took a deep breath and held it, closed her eyes. When she opened them, her expression had folded into acquiescence. "It is not the least of my sins that I force you to spend so much time counseling me, Reverend," she said formally.

Sandy smiled and gave the girl a friendly squeeze of the shoulder. "Curiosity and empathy are healthy, and valuable, señorita," she said. "But you need to remember that there are proper channels to focus these things into. Prayer and study are best, but drinking and carousing will do in a pinch."

Carmen gave a nervous laugh, eyes widening. Sandy could tell that the girl didn't feel entirely comfortable with the unexpected direction of the conversation, which was, of course, part of the strategy for handling backsliders. Young people in particular were easy to refocus on banal and harmless "sins" and away from thoughts that could actually be dangerous.

"Fetch the others up here, now," Sandy said. "We should set to it."

Carmen soon had all twenty of her fellow students gathered around Sandy. Lucas had been down the eastern slope far enough to gather some deadwood and now he struck it ablaze with a flint and steel from his travel kit. Sandy crumbled a handful of incense into the flames.

Ford had been named the seminar's lector by consensus, and he opened his text. "Blessed are the Mapmakers...," he said.

"For they hunger and thirst after righteousness," they all finished.

Then they all fell to prayer and singing. Sandy turned her back to them — congregants more than students now — and opened her heart to the land below her. She felt the effrontery of the unmapped lake like a caul over her face, a restriction on the land that prevented breath and life.

Sandy showed them how to test the prevailing winds and how to bank

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the censers in chevrons so that the cleansing fires would fall onto the appropriate points along the dam.

Finally, she thumbed an ashen symbol onto every wrist and forehead, including her own, and lit the oils of the censer *primorus* with a prayer. When the hungry flames began to beam outward from her censer, she softly repeated the prayer for emphasis, then nodded her assent that the rest begin.

The dam did not burst in a spectacular explosion of mud and boulders and waters. Instead, it atrophied throughout the long afternoon, wearing away under their prayers even as their voices grew hoarse. Eventually, the dammed river itself joined its voice to theirs and speeded the correction.

The unchurched in the valley tried for a few hours to pull their boats up onto the shore, but the muddy expanse between the water and their lurching docks grew too quickly. They turned their attention to bundling up the goods from their mean little houses then, and soon a line of them was snaking deeper into the mountains to the east, like a line of ants fleeing a hill beneath a looking glass.

With the ridge to its west, the valley fell into evening shadow long before the Cartographers' camp. They could still see below though, they could see that, as Sandy had promised Carmen, there were no secrets revealed by the dying water.

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Ken Altabef is a healer by trade, plying his trade in the New York environs. With this story, his first professional sale, you've got to hand it to him for coming up with an interesting new take on an age-old subject.

Pleased to Meetcha

By Ken Altabef

IT WAS A RIDICULOUS NOTION of course, but at the time I was a writer and ridiculous notions were my stock in trade. Worse yet, I was a fantasist. Daydreams and dalliances, wondrous armies of mechanical men, entire civilizations etched onto the head of a pin, mighty dragons and mightier kings — you name it, all rustling about in that crowded little space between my ears. Calcimine castles in the air accessible only by the Pegasus of my imagination, I had but to open the floodgates and let them pour forth. So it was not at all unusual for a bit of superstition to make its way into my reality. It was not at all unusual for me to obsess over some petty piece of daily business, until ascribing to it an irrational power of mythic proportions. Case in point: a handshake, and a famous man.

A simple handshake. A ritual performed so often and with so little conscious thought as to be practically an instinctual reflex. Although the exact origin is difficult to pinpoint, there is a widespread belief that in its oldest form the handshake signified the handing of power from a god to an early Egyptian ruler. Centuries later, it was this magical aspect of the

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handshake that was so magnificently rendered on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. In Medieval times, it might mean anything from a friendly greeting to a quick check for concealed weapons. In the twenty-first century, the handshake had evolved into an important social custom; a symbol of honor and good faith, it "sealed the deal." But could it be magic? What exactly was exchanged in that special moment of personal interaction — a little sweat, some exfoliated skin cells, a warm fuzzy feeling. What else?

MAGICAL? I SUPPOSE you could say he was more than a little magical. Harold Eldritch was a phenomenon. Sixteen bestsellers in as many years, one or two of them still clinging like drowning sailors to the bottom of the sales chart as the newest blockbuster hit the top. Works as varied in genre as was possible: gothic horror, two-fisted adventure, a sizzling midsummer romance, even a couple of high-tech medical thrillers. His wellspring of ideas was inexhaustible, his imagination boundless, his research always impeccable. To read his works you actually believed he was an arctic explorer, a gigolo, part Mafia hitman, part Caribbean pirate, a sorcerer supreme, a retired brain surgeon, and a WWI flying ace. His characters were always convincing, his plots wildly original and yet they always rang true with details as finely honed as real experience. I'm sure you get the picture. As a fledgling novelist, he was my idol. He was everything I wanted to be.

I first saw Eldritch speak on the campus at Hofstra. He was delivering a diatribe on the importance of energy in writing, spouting pointers on maximizing output and creativity, as he dashed back and forth, buzzing around the drama club's makeshift stage like a honeybee at an orchid convention. He was the picture of crackling exuberance. His footsteps set the old wood to creaking, if not with the weight of his stature then with the force of his ideas. He was quite a sight — a diminutive five-footer with a receding shock of unkempt sandy hair that refused to lie in any conventional manner across his scalp, a set of flailing arms, and a pair of wild dark eyes. Unrestrained energy seemed to shoot out from him in tiny electric bolts, invigorating the ravenous and adoring crowd as he poured forth humorous anecdotes and evocative tales of his early career. He had

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the crowd on its knees. An unfailing eruption of enthusiastic laughter punctuated his every punch line. It was hard to picture the legendary Harold Eldritch as a fledgling news reporter struggling to choke out a few lines of prose after-hours on a secondhand Smith Corona and yet, an accomplished raconteur, he painted the scene with a flair of practiced merriment.

After the speech he opened up the floor to questions from the audience. The sea of faces that gathered tightly about the author were as varied as his oeuvre, ranging from geriatrics to housewives to the usual collegiate types, with some longshoremen, Hindu mystics, circus freaks, and a few disenfranchised pagan deities thrown in for good measure. Inevitably he was asked the one question that all successful writers dread, and are pestered with at every turn: Just where did he get all those wonderful ideas? He rolled his eyes and laughed, characteristically waving his hands in the air. He was glad to explain. He had made a deal with the Devil; he had stumbled upon Edgar Rice Burroughs's lost steamer trunk stuffed with manuscripts; he received messages via Ouija board; he depended upon a vast store of remembrances of past lives; HE HAD AN INTENSE RELATIONSHIP WITH A VERY CREATIVE GNOME!! Where did he get his ideas? Next question.

After the lecture, the crowd shuffled its way into the hall for the obligatory book signing. I don't remember what novel, or two or three, he was hawking at that time; it was ten years ago now and there have been an endless stream of them even to this day. But whatever it was, I had a copy tucked in the crook of my arm, and I braved the seemingly endless line of sycophants waiting to meet the man. During the long wait my excitement steadily grew, as I pondered and obsessed over my insidious, ridiculously superstitious plan. You see, I'd gotten this idea into my head — a crazy, childish notion as I've already said — but it had burrowed its way into my brain nonetheless. I thought that if I could just shake his hand, the hand that had pumped so much creativity into his typewriter (he didn't believe in word processors), that maybe a little bit of the magic would rub off on me. I'd written a few stories, won a couple of local awards and one national contest, and I felt I was ready to break out into the big time. I had the talent and I had the ideas; all I was lacking were the years of hard work necessary to refine the style, and hard work never seemed

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much of a valid contender next to a magical shortcut. So I wanted that handshake. Silly me.

I waited patiently as the line crawled forth. Every so often, leaning out to check my progress, I would spy the great author himself seated at a cheap folding table at the end of the hallway. At last it was my turn. I must confess to a certain inotropic thumping of my heart as I stepped toward the table. I towered over him, but he smiled paternally up at me as I extended my hand. He extended his, and there it was, the long-awaited moment of contact. Our hands grappled firmly for a moment as if undertaking the first grip of an arm-wrestling match, and then it was over. Had I felt a little spark of electricity pass between us in that brief pressing of the flesh? A tingle surely, but was it really magic or simply the shag carpet and my sneakers talking? There was no time to contemplate that now, I was face to face with Harold Eldritch and the silence was growing uncomfortable. What to say? What to say?

"It's truly a pleasure to meet you, sir," I managed.

"It's a pleasure being met," he quipped, a practiced retort he had probably used countless times before when faced with the same pedantic line.

Then I stared at him for a moment, ridiculous fanboy that I was, totally unprepared as to what to say next. You see, I hadn't rehearsed the next line, and I began running all the obligatory responses through my mind in whipsaw fashion. Should I tell him I have read all his books? Should I say I'm one of his biggest fans? Should I fall over myself complimenting everything he'd ever done? The myriad obvious, hackneyed possibilities that presented themselves left me speechless. I wished I had a really insightful question to ask, but I was surprised to find myself awash in a sea of nothing but trite blather.

He smiled impatiently for a moment and then rescued me. "A writer...right?" he asked, still smiling, an index finger poised straight up in the air, punctuating his deduction.

"Yeah," I said.

"Well, keep at it, son!" he advised, slapping me playfully on the shoulder and gently pushing me along with the same deft movement. Next customer. I shuffled off. Just another aspiring writer in a vast sea of aspiring writers. Well, that was the great meeting with the great Harold

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Eldritch. I made my way to the exit, and I never saw him again, except for a quick glance back from the gymnasium door. There he was still working the crowd, smiling wildly, shaking all those hands.

IT'S TEN YEARS on now. I'm a modestly successful accountant at a small North Jersey firm. Needless to say, my great writing career did not go as planned. In fact, I don't write at all anymore. I haven't penned a short story in eight or nine years. Not even a poem, a ditty, or an ode. No, I'll never be another Harold Eldritch. I'll never have one bestseller to my credit, let alone a string of a hundred. He's still pumping them out, magnificently working his old-school typewriter on the ranch in sunny CA, still speaking engagements to the thrill of young writers everywhere. Still shaking hands.

I know how to write, mind you. I've still got the knack, can still gild the lily, can still turn a phrase. No trouble there, but there's one tiny little damnably insurmountable problem. I can put the words together, but I can't come up with a story worth squat. Man, I've tried and I've scavenged and I've searched but there's not one original idea left in my head. I never saw Harold Eldritch again. I never wanted to see him again, the bastard. Say, Harry, where *do* you get all those wonderful ideas?

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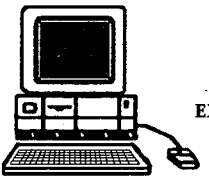

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We hope that the people in charge of reconstructing New Orleans won't disturb too many spirits in the process. Perhaps they should hire Albert Cowdrey as a consultant. Is there anyone who covers the many supernatural sides of the Crescent City as well as Mr. C?

Immortal Forms

By Albert E. Cowdrey

KAY, OKAY, THOUGHT Tommy Salvati. *Maybe the neighbors were right when they said I should check things out.*

Wearing the uniform of his profession — tasseled loafers and a three-piece charcoal suit — he slammed the door of his Acura and stood for a moment in the prickly blue dusk, frowning at the camelback cottage where he'd spent some of the happiest times of his childhood.

To left and right were the houses of neighbors who'd remembered his name from long ago and called to tell him that something was wrong at Hannah Loewe's. He could see why: in her front yard, high grass shrilled with insect life; wrinkled newspapers lay in the dust of the unswept gallery.

He rang the door bell. Nothing. He tried a gate set in the patio wall. Nailed shut. A streetlight flicked on across the street and shards of broken glass glinted atop the wall. A long black bough of a live oak reached across from the hidden garden; Tommy managed somehow to swing himself up. The branch gyrated, and he was clutching the rough bark to keep from

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falling when he spotted, just ahead in the dusky foliage, the face of a dead child.

As he stared, unbelieving, another face emerged, bland and simpering. Then a third and a fourth. Shadowy recesses freckled by gleams of light turned into a picture puzzle, one of those puzzles that ask how many snakes you can find — and the longer you look, the more you see.

Stretching out an unsteady hand, Tommy touched the nearest face. Cool pitted stone. Hannah collected stone angels. Why had she butchered them, set the heads up here as sentinels? He thought of the nailed gate, the daggers of glass just beneath his heels. *Oh Lord,* he thought. *Dementia.*

Slowly he worked his way across the wall and dropped from the oak into the patio. A thick mattress of vines broke his fall. He stood up, dusting abraded hands and gazing at an alien landscape. The beds and plantings he remembered had all vanished under thickets of cat's-claw and creeper. In the half-light some piles of vegetation looked like giant tortoises, some like crouching apes. A pond once shimmering with koi had turned to a marsh where a frog brayed like a child's tin trumpet.

On a fancy iron table lay a broken teapot. How many times as a child he'd sat here, drinking iced tea and spooning in Hannah's homemade sorbet. He touched the teapot and a black rat jumped out and vanished into the jungle.

His heart was drumming as he waded through foliage to the kitchen door and knocked — expecting no answer, getting none. Overhead a lamp glowed in the window of Hannah's bedroom. He remembered it well, an antique with a painted glass shade. The red-bronze light showed a dark shape on the ceiling that Tommy thought must be a water stain. Until it began to move.

Suddenly he was back at his car. How did he get there? He couldn't remember. His pants were torn and he'd lost a loafer. Blood seeped through deepened abrasions on his soft lawyerly hands. He fumbled his cell phone to his ear and when the 911 operator answered, tried to explain why she ought to dispatch a cop car.

She said, "There's *what* all over the ceiling?"

He said, "Flies," and she said, "Oh. Okay. Hang on."

* * *

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Since the condition of Hannah's body made most tests impossible, the coroner fell back on "cardiopulmonary arrest," which to Tommy meant that Hannah had stopped breathing and her heart had stopped beating and so she died.

Logical, he thought, but not enlightening. A week after finding the body, he made an appointment with a psychiatrist at St. Vincent's and told him about Hannah's garden — the glass-topped wall, the beheaded statues. Atypical for Alzheimer's, said the doctor, and suggested instead "polypharmacy," which turned out to be a four-dollar word for taking too many pills. So many lonely old people, the shrink explained, become addicts. Tommy shook his head. By then he'd been through the house, finding one dusty, half-empty bottle of cooking sherry in the kitchen, nothing stronger than aspirin in the bathroom cabinet. The psychiatrist shrugged: with no patient, he couldn't diagnose.

Yet Tommy kept looking for an explanation, and not only because Hannah had been a friend, or because the doctor's remark about lonely old people made him feel guilty for neglecting her. He had a more solid reason.

Technically at least, he'd been her lawyer, though years had passed since she'd given him any work to do. Her power of attorney still reposed in his office files, and he used it to open her bank box. There he found her will — hand-written, properly witnessed, and perfectly legal. He was not surprised at that. What did surprise him was discovering that Hannah had left him everything she owned. Including the duty of finding out what had happened to her.

Searching her address book, he came upon the name of Olivia Henderson, Nurse. He called on her one evening. She was a quiet, solid woman with café-au-lait skin, living in a Creole cottage on Esplanade Ridge. Olivia said that she and Hannah had been friends for years. When she got sick, Olivia took care of her for a while. But then she got so strange that Olivia had to leave.

"She bit me," said the nurse, showing Tommy a white scar on one wrist.

"She *bit* you?"

"I couldn't believe it. She deliberately messed on herself, and when I went to clean her up she bit me with those big horsey teeth of hers. I couldn't take it no more. She was a nice lady once, but she wasn't no kin to me."

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So there it was again, the touch of madness. And still no reason why.

As executor of the will, one of Tommy's duties was to inventory the estate. Night after night he made the trek to Hannah's house, writing endless lists on long yellow legal pads, and in the process rediscovering a large part of his own past.

When his father developed prostate cancer, and later after he died when his mother went back to work, Hannah — though she was only a friend and neighbor — had stepped in as babysitter. Old maid though she was, she'd been superb at it.

Pictures tucked away in brown folders showed her in her prime, big and busty with a bronze-Indian profile and prominent teeth, looking more like a mountain woman than an art historian. Other pictures showed a laughing little boy getting a ride up the stairs to bed on her strong back. Tommy remembered how, when he was washed and jammied and tucked in, Hannah used to sit beside his cot, telling him stories about the great artists or teaching him to sing *Frère Jacques, dormez-vous?* until he fell asleep.

But there'd been many Hannahs besides his adopted Aunt Goody. Files labeled "Business" contained a sheaf of threatening letters, some of which Tommy had written for her. *I warn you that every civil and criminal resource will be explored unless you return the down payment within thirty days from this date,* one missive concluded. And she had meant every word.

She terrorized home-improvement racketeers with menaces she was always ready to carry out. When a mail-order outfit swindled her out of sixteen dollars, she spent weeks collecting evidence from other victims and harassed the postal inspectors into charging the chief crook with mail fraud. Ultimately he went to prison and Hannah remarked, with somewhat frightening relish, "The right man in the right place."

Once Tommy asked his mother about Hannah's role — seemingly so out of character — as an avenging fury.

"She's an angry person, you know," said Mama simply. The conversation took place after her own cancer had been diagnosed. Formerly an ample, pillowy woman with fine dark eyes, she'd changed, the bones of her face taking on the gaunt power of a Michelangelo sibyl. In a sickroom voice that faded and strengthened and faded again, she went on:

"Hannah has a terrible time making contact, I mean emotional

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contact, with other adults. There's something — I don't know — a little inhuman about her. She's wonderful with children. With her garden. With her students. Yet she's always alone and she doesn't know why. Something's missing in her and she doesn't know what it is. It's a good thing she's basically a fine person. Otherwise she'd probably kill somebody."

That remark had made young Tommy shake his head. Hannah kill somebody? He wondered if his mother's mind was wandering. Especially since Hannah was all solicitude for her dying friend, aiding her like a sister and unobtrusively helping Tommy through his time of grief after she died.

The profoundest Hannah had been the teacher. In the files he found lecture notes for her course in Art Appreciation at Tulane. They were surprisingly dull — merely lists of slides with enigmatic asides like "Comp to Cez," which probably meant "compare to Cezanne." They gave no hint of what the course had really been like, or what it meant to Tommy and the other gaping undergrads who'd taken it with him.

To Hannah art was energy, was ecstasy, was the only real thing. For a while, aged nineteen, Tommy gave up *Playboy* centerfolds to dream over Botticelli angels, while his nightmares took on new and worse shapes from Goya's monsters. Listening to her voice — for all her bigness, her homeliness, her sheer physical force, she had a voice like an oboe — he sensed other worlds from which immortal forms, beautiful or terrible, wander into ours like unicorns into a suburban garden.

That had been a strange episode in the life of a prosaic young man, and it didn't last long. Tommy graduated and went to law school and the unicorns galloped away, never to return until he glimpsed them again, sitting at night under a reading lamp in the house of dead woman.

As he boxed Hannah's files for burning, Tommy felt he was seeing her at last as she really had been. A powerful, lonely personality that for lack of mature love had sought comfort in another woman's child and the exaltation of art. Nodding, wiping his eyes, Tommy would have closed Hannah's case then — except that he still didn't know what had happened to her, or why.

The house wasn't only a treasury of nostalgia for its new owner. Getting it in shape to sell meant expense and some backbreaking work.

The most disgusting job was cleaning Hannah's bedroom. The mattress

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had to be hauled to a landfill along with the curtains and the rug and other things that harbored smells. He did that himself at night, loading a small truck owned by an odd-jobs man who worked beside him with a red bandanna tied around his face. As a bonus, Tommy gave him Hannah's mahogany bed frame and the painted lamp, whose peculiar red-bronze light he never wanted to see again.

Tommy cleaned out Hannah's handsome old French armoire and gave Goodwill the piles of clean, mended clothing and the desolate lineup of shoes he found there. He sprayed the room with an air freshener called Pert, turned on the air conditioner, and locked the door. The room stayed that way until the last faint tendrils of the odor of death had vanished. Meantime professional cleaners scoured the rest of the house. The odd-jobs man took the butchered angels to a landfill, and a lawn-and-garden service restored the plantings in the patio. All Tommy's cash went into repairs, but at the end he owned a solid, handsome house with a lovely garden and no mortgage. By then he'd put so much of himself into the place that he decided to live there. In 1998 he sold his condo and moved in. It was the first place he'd ever lived that he could fix up exactly as he pleased, and he soon became a confirmed putterer, often working past midnight and falling into bed in the small hours until his alarm brought him groggily to life again.

Defiantly almost, he decided against using Hannah's bedroom for storage: instead, he made it his law library. In many sessions of night work, he put down a rose carpet from the Sarouk Shop, installed bookcases and a comfortable old leather recliner, set up a desk for his computer, moved in an old brass floorlamp and a chiming Seth Thomas clock inherited from his mother. He bought second-hand lawbooks by the linear foot — Louisiana's *Civil Code*, the *U.S. Code*, up-to-date fat tomes on tax law — and lined them up in orderly array on the shelves, like soldiers in red uniforms or blue.

Lawyers, like roaches, feel most comfortable among piles of paper, so he began bringing work home from the office. Late at night he'd pick a lawbook off the shelves and settle down to read and take notes, until the Westminster chimes struck twelve or one. He became so comfortable in the room, despite its past, that he made it into his nest — bought a Bose sound system and an HD television, and began turning Hannah's old

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armoire into an entertainment center. That meant removing some of the shelves and boring a hole in the back for the TV cable.

He was working on this project one night when he discovered that the armoire, like many pieces of Victorian furniture, had a secret compartment. He slid back a panel in the ornate base, and learned at last why Hannah had gone bonkers.

INSIDE WERE one hundred and fifty-six pill bottles. The names were as plastic as the containers — Violex, Sinkomar, Harpogil — uppers and downers: mood-altering at best, mind-bending if misused.

Tommy studied the dates on the labels. Hannah had been an addict for years. Over time the doses had become stronger, the refills closer together. Tench Armstrong, M.D., had been the prescribing physician. All by himself, Doctor Feel-Good had supplied Hannah enough pills to knock off a troop of old ladies. Going through her checkbook stubs, Tommy discovered that in the past three years alone she'd paid Armstrong some $55,000 for "examinations" and "tests." She'd been buying the prescriptions. Not to put too fine a point on it, Doctor Armstrong had driven her mad for profit.

Okay, the law had an answer for people like that. But when Tommy consulted an attorney in his firm whose specialty was malpractice, he learned that nailing Armstrong wouldn't be easy.

What happened to the body? asked his colleague. Well, it had been cremated — for obvious reasons.

The colleague shrugged. There went any chance of proving Hannah had died from an overdose. Furthermore, Armstrong was a medical entrepreneur, a specialist in psychiatric gerontology with his own clinic and an income estimated at a couple of million a year. Socially and politically, his connections were terrific. Within a week, Tommy spotted him in the society pages of the *Times-Picayune* — an ample, broad-bellied guy with a moon face, a Vandyke beard, and a blonde trophy wife aged about twenty-five. The couple lived in a six-column mansion on St. Charles Avenue with manicured grounds, an Olympic pool, and tennis courts. Anderson belonged to four Carnival krewes; a philanthropist, he contributed to good causes, and made sure that everybody knew it.

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Tommy filed a complaint with the state medical society anyway, and tried to interest the DA's office in the case. The only result was to convince him that nobody was touching Armstrong on the basis of the flimsy evidence he could produce. Against the word of the attending physician, who could prove the drugs weren't needed? And who in the medical community would testify against him?

Undeterred, Tommy began writing letters, aiming now at state agencies and charitable groups and politicians interested in the health and welfare of seniors. He phrased the letters carefully to avoid libel actions, but he put his point across. He wanted to plant suspicions, to make people aware that Armstrong wasn't all starched shirtfront and charity balls.

I wasn't born Italian for nothing, he thought. *I know that revenge is a dish best eaten cold.* So he fired off his letters, two or three a week, and waited for the chill to set in.

The campaign against Armstrong took only a fraction of Tommy's busy days. His job obsessed him. In the office, in tax court, and in long night sessions at home he was billing eighty to ninety hours a week. He rarely saw his house by daylight.

He liked best the nights he worked at home — the ample space, the comfort, the quiet. A Guatemalan maid spent one day a week keeping the house clean, but Tommy locked her out of the library, where his papers were spread out in a controlled chaos only he understood.

From time to time he'd knock off work for an hour or two, eat a bite, relax, down a scotch. Sprawled in his chair beside the lawbooks, he'd exchange their strangulated prose for his favorite forms of trash literature — a Crichton thriller, a volume of King's canned horror, a local weekly called *Snide* that featured mean-spirited gossip and personals of the "ISO dwarf in a wetsuit" variety. Or he'd flick on the TV that now occupied the armoire and watch a few scenes from an old movie on TCM before returning to work.

Then one bright day in the spring of 1999, a bout of flu kept him home from the office. Sick or well, he had a brief to finish and just before noon, needing a citation, he lurched and wobbled — snuffling, a little woozy — into his library.

Without the slightest warning all his nerve ends started burning. He

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gasped and inhaled the stench of death. Insects buzzed like a transformer, and he had a sudden horrible feeling that his spinal cord was turning to a cold, viscous fluid.

He stumbled out of the room and fell flat on his back on the hall rug. Like a drunk he lay there for long minutes with the house revolving slowly around him. At last he pushed himself into a sitting position, and stared back into the bright empty room — a room bright as the March day, empty as an out-of-season swimming pool.

What in the *hell* had happened?

Slowly he stood up on rubbery legs, wobbled to his bedroom and fell down again, this time on his rumpled bed. After an hour's recovery and a tasteless lunch, he phoned his office, got the citation from a clerk, and completed the brief. (The fact that it was full of absurd errors only became apparent the next day.)

Hours passed before he could bring himself to approach the library again. At suppertime he spooned down a bowl of canned soup for warmth and courage, then climbed the stairs a little after seven. Along the way he turned on every available light; at the library doorway, he tested the room like a nervous swimmer trying the water — first a toe, then a foot.

Trembling, he entered and switched on the lamp. Hey, no problem. The room was just a room; the books drowsed on their shelves, the clock ticked on its table, and the rose patterns of the carpet glowed gently, like the grille of a firescreen. The TV slept in the armoire. And that was all.

He returned to his bedroom and crashed. After a sick and stressful day, he slept without dreams — except that sometime near dawn he half awoke and heard a voice like an oboe singing *Frère Jacques, dormez-vous?* Next day he regained his health, and with it his professional ability to explain anything.

Flu does things to the nerves, right? So he'd had an episode of some kind. Seizing on his moment of weakness, his memories of Hannah's death scene had hit him with hallucinatory force. Something like that could *never* happen when he was well.

He demonstrated the truth of this analysis by sitting in the library all that evening — first working to repair the faulty brief, then relaxing. The rewritten brief was splendidly logical and massively footnoted, and when

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he turned it in, his supervising partner said it was "impossible to improve upon."

So, see?

Feeling chipper, he decided to spend the whole of the following weekend working at home. On Saturday morning he walked into the library with firm, deliberate strides.

This time he was lucky to be able to crawl out. When he reached the bathroom and began to assess damage, his heart was behaving oddly — speeding up, slowing down, speeding up — like somebody in anaphylactic shock. Blood was gushing from his nose, probably because he'd landed face-first on the floor. His whole body had a ghastly invertebrate feeling, as if he'd turned into some creature made of cold, boneless jelly. Warmth and structure returned slowly, though he had fits of shivering for hours afterward. Recovering downstairs with a scotch — a strong one — he tried to come to terms with the most bizarre reality he'd ever faced: that Thomas Salvati, counselor at law, had a haunted room. Even more baffling, the damn place was haunted *only in the daytime.*

He thought of selling the house but concluded that if he did, he'd be morally responsible for whatever happened to the buyers. He thought of emptying the room again, locking it, and abandoning that part of the house. But goddamn it, the room was his nest — and anyway, it was unoccupied at night, when he really needed it.

Little by little he learned to live with his demon. He approached the library only at dusk. He learned to sense, by a kind of fingernails-across-the-blackboard keening of the nerves, the times when he was too early and the room still in its bad phase. He brought upstairs a plump stone angel that had escaped beheading and propped it against the door, so that no vagrant breeze could ever slam it with him inside. He also redoubled his efforts to get Armstrong, thinking *Maybe if I do that for her, she'll be content, she'll move on.*

So he wrote more and nastier letters. He spent an hour when he should have been billing a client $175 at the local DEA field office, making a pitch to the agent in charge that if Armstrong had supplied lethal quantities and combinations of drugs to one elderly patient, he was probably still doing it to others. And how about that damned clinic of his? What was

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happening to the old people he treated there? The DEA man listened with a face as warm and expressive as the left buttock of a corpse and said he didn't think it was a federal problem.

Then — in an unexpected way — Tommy's campaign began to produce results. On the afternoon of a particularly featureless Monday, his office intercom cleared its throat and announced that Dr. Trench Barnstorm wanted to consult him professionally.

The doctor strode in on stout legs, expansive in every sense, wearing Brooks Brothers on his back. He was even bigger than Tommy had thought, with the top-heavy look of a linebacker run to seed. While Tommy was gesturing him to a chair, Armstrong's little pouchy eyes stole restless glances at him and everything else in the office.

"Mr. Salvati," he boomed. "I, ah, want you to understand that normally I'd have my legal advisors, Macready, Stern, and Bourgeois, contact you."

"About what?"

"They tell me you were attorney for Mrs. Loewe?"

"I was."

Armstrong nodded and drew a twelve-dollar cigar from an inside pocket. He didn't ask permission, just tucked it into his mouth and popped a gold lighter. Tommy sniffed appreciatively. The cigar was downright fragrant.

"I have become the object of a strange sort of persecution," Armstrong began. "It appears to have something to do with Mrs. Loewe."

"What sort of persecution?"

"Let's just say that it takes forms which are both disgusting and illegal. Invading my home! That's illegal!"

"Have you contacted the police?"

"Ah, no."

"Why not?"

Armstrong stared at Tommy. Tommy stared back. The ash fell off the end of the long cigar.

"This business has got to stop," Armstrong said too loudly. "You've been filing complaints against me."

"What are you accusing me of?"

Suddenly Armstrong looked around wildly, like an animal in a trap.

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He sucked on the cigar again, like a big baby on a thumb. That seemed to quiet him down.

"Look," he said finally, "we seem to have gotten off on the wrong foot."

Tommy raised his dark eyebrows and waited.

"For some time," his visitor began ponderously, apparently a rehearsed speech, "I've not been entirely satisfied with the quality of legal advice I've been getting on taxation. I believe that's your specialty?"

"Yes."

"Also, when you get to my age, you begin to appreciate youth, vigor, new ideas. Energy."

Tommy glanced at his watch. Armstrong's little darting eyes caught the movement. "I'm getting to the point," he said irritably. "Fact is, I'd like to put you on retainer. Say a thousand a month, in addition, of course, to legitimate fees. I've got a case coming up — the IRS wants to hit my clinic for about 300K they claim I owe them — and I can tell you the business is likely to be pretty lucrative from your viewpoint."

Groucho Marx, thought Tommy, *you were a true philosopher when you said, "Time wounds all heels."*

Armstrong was trying to bribe him.

"I'm sorry," he said in his smoothest voice. "I'm overwhelmed by work as it is, and I won't be able to accommodate you."

"Then," Armstrong said, rising to his feet — encased, Tommy estimated, in $500 shoes — "I have to tell you that I know how to defend myself. Got that? I'd rather do it like a gentleman, but if I have any further trouble I'll take care of it another way."

"I'll certainly remember that."

"See that you do," he growled, jamming the cigar into his mouth and heading for the door. He had an impressive exit going when he spoiled the effect by running into the jamb.

"Try turning sideways, doctor," Tommy suggested.

"Screw you, greaseball," he said, and slammed the door behind him.

Tommy was still thinking over this curious interview that evening when he bought a bottle of White Horse scotch and the latest copy of *Snide* at his neighborhood watering hole. He was seated in his library, scotch at his elbow, when for the second time that day Dr. Armstrong put in an

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appearance. According to a smudgy, anonymous item in the gossip section,

> *local Superdoc may need more than a Band-Aid for his bank account if his wife takes him to divorce court as she's threatening to do. She claims he's been bringing faisandé body parts home from his clinic and hiding them in the bedroom in an effort to drive her out of the house. She's charging extreme physical and mental cruelty and wants a few mil to make her feel better.*

Tommy spilled his drink, ice and all, into his lap. Of *course* his haunted room was okay at night. The fury was elsewhere, obtaining justice in her own way.

SO, HE THOUGHT over coffee next morning, *the fat bastard, in his big bedroom in his six-columned house, smells the corpse he created.*

Did he hear flies buzzing? Did his nerve ends burn? Did his spine feel like it was dissolving? If so, Tommy really couldn't blame him for being scared — or for trying to convince himself that his ordeal must have a natural explanation. *That Wop lawyer! Tried to get me for malpractice! He must be involved in this — somehow.*

When Tommy left the house, he spotted a gray Toyota parked across the street. Inside, reading a newspaper, sat a sharp-nosed little man in an outsized brown suit. Seeing him tickled Tommy, because his firm had employed the guy once or twice. Pete Exnicios was a private investigator with a second-floor office on Magazine Street over a coffee shop called (appropriately) Grounds for Divorce.

Tommy almost felt sorry for him, sitting there pretending to read the *Times-Picayune*'s sparkling prose. He thought of offering him a few back copies of *Snide*, but decided it was smarter not to get cute. So he ignored Pete and went to work, forgetting that daylight is by far the best time to burglarize the house of a working person who lives alone.

Tommy had long since pulled the nails out of the back gate. It was locked, but the lock was more for show than practical value. Pete might have taken a minute, two minutes at most, to get into the yard. Tommy's

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neighbors in back had a dog named Wilbur, and they heard him barking — but then, he did a lot of that.

Meanwhile, shielded from view by the patio wall, Pete Exnicios was picking the back door lock. And when Tommy's expensive alarm system started screaming, he punched in the code and shut it off. The police never found a clear explanation for that; maybe Pete had a friend or blackmailee at Delta Housegard. Anyway, he walked in and made himself at home.

When Tommy returned at seven, carrying a briefcase full of work, a box of freshly made sushi and a couple of Kirin beers, dark had arrived and faint urban stars were coming out. Wilbur was still demonstrating beyond the patio wall. Curious, Tommy went in through the gate to see what was wrong, and found his back door open and a professional-quality steel pick embedded in the Yale lock.

Pausing only to deposit his dinner on the kitchen counter and grab his 9-millimeter Glock from its hiding place in a magazine rack, Tommy began to explore the house, flicking on lights as he went. He followed a trail of minor disturbances — opened drawers, shuffled papers — from his desk downstairs to the library in the second floor rear.

He approached the room warily, like a veteran soldier entering a minefield. *It's always safe in the dark*, he reminded himself. He hesitated at the door, testing the air for vibrations. He sensed nothing. Entering, he stumbled, flicked on the lamp and stared down at Pete Exnicios who, though dead and cold, was staring back.

His face was blue and the eyes bulged out with enormous glistening black pupils. His right hand, frozen in rigor, had sunk deep into his throat. Aside from Pete, the room was quiet, comfy, inviting. No doubt that was how it looked when he entered it.

Later, while the detectives and crime scene techs were doing their thing upstairs and downstairs and all around, Tommy sat outside in the friendly dark. He threw the sushi over the wall to Wilbur and drank the Kirin, wondering what exactly Pete had been up to, and how exactly he had died.

A detective came out, asked him to make a statement, and gave him a ride to the Victorian castle that housed the Second District. En route, he mentioned that Pete had been carrying a pocketful of Serenac capsules — powerful tranquilizers, currently in the news because large quantities were seeping out of medical channels onto the street.

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So maybe Pete had been intending to plant the stuff, then tip off the cops or the DEA. That might have struck Anderson as a neat, ironic revenge on his enemy.

How Pete died was less easy to answer. Seemingly he'd strangled himself, which was, of course, impossible. Next day his doctor came forward and revealed that he'd been taking anticonvulsive medication to control epilepsy. Now the coroner ruled that while burgling Tommy's house, Pete had somehow choked himself while in the throes of a grand mal seizure.

The verdict satisfied nobody. Even Tommy knew that an epileptic's most violent act was to swallow his tongue. Also, since Pete was taking medication, he shouldn't have had a fit at all. But the coroner and the cops had more important things to do than worry about the weirdsville death of a two-bit housebreaker, and from a practical standpoint, that was all that mattered.

Except to Tommy, who now knew that he was sharing his house with a killer.

Despite his cool long-studied plans of revenge, he'd never really wanted to kill anybody. His campaign against Anderson had employed only words — the lawyer's weapon — to bring a criminal to book. The kind of demonic fury that could seize a man's own hand and use it to strangle him was something else, and it scared him badly.

While drinking his evening scotches — more and more of them every night — he told himself with tiresome repetition that Hannah had never been his enemy, had loved him, had left him everything she owned. He argued that in going after Pete, she'd been pursuing the unrighteous, just as she'd always done.

But he couldn't buy his own brief. Pete's fate struck him as profoundly wrong. Even in her most wrathful moods, Hannah had been Mrs. Jehovah, merciless but just. Death for housebreaking was not justice.

Once he'd admitted that, his internal trial of The Singular Case of the Corpse in the Haunted Room moved inexorably to a terrifying conclusion: the Hannah Loewe who killed Pete was someone he'd never known.

During her last awful years, her splendid mind had been drugged and deformed into something else. The dweller in the back room was the kind

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of intruder who — after a devastating illness or addiction — takes the place of someone you love. A familiar face joined to an altered mind and a mysterious, vile soul.

The night he reached that verdict Tommy didn't exactly fall asleep; he passed out. Over the next couple of weeks, this became a pattern with him.

AND THEN — as usual, without the slightest warning — came relief.

One Sunday afternoon he was passing the door of the library when something stopped him — an astonishing sense of quietude within. The room looked exactly as it always did, yet he knew it was different.

He stood in the hall remembering a case of mumps he'd had as a child. During his days in a high fever, ordinary sunlight seared his eyeballs, ordinary colors pulsated, sounds either crashed against his ears or faded out entirely. To recover was to reenter the real world.

Well, the sickness that pervaded the haunted room in daylight was gone. That was all. Just gone.

Cautiously he stepped through the doorway and sniffed. He smelled only the dust of leather bindings. Something buzzed, but it was just a fat bumblebee exploring a windowpane.

Somewhat dazed, he sat down. Sunlight filled the green garden and the oak tree filtered the brightness before letting it in. A Good Humor truck passed in the distance, playing "Turkey in the Straw." Next door children were playing in a wading pool, and spray flew up mingled with shrieks of silvery laughter.

He spent a long moment thinking about possible whys and wherefores. Then he lifted a phone, called Armstrong's residence and asked to speak to him.

A maid's soft-slurred voice said he was taking a trip to Italy and wouldn't be back for a while. Tommy said he hoped the doctor was feeling better. The maid was evidently bored, and soon was gossiping freely.

"No, Honey, I don't think he is any better. He used to be such a big noisy man, but now he's considerable fell in, you know? I don't think he been sleepin' good neither. You ought to see his baidclose in the mornin'.

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Twisted up like corkscrews, and — guess I shouldn't be sayin' this — his baid smell bad. Well, you know, when people be sick, oftentimes they smell bad. It's the sickness, is all."

Tommy commiserated, said goodbye. The dish of revenge was chilled and ready, but he no longer wanted to eat it. He felt only pity for the fool of a man who, for mere money, had deserved and incurred such a fate.

His own destiny brightened as Armstrong's darkened. Free of his unspeakable housemate, Tommy's step grew lighter, his world purer and fresher. He cut back his drinking. He took fewer cases, worked more quickly and had time left for play. He joined the Uptown AC to swim and play racquetball; in the pool he met a woman, Jeanette Weiss, he'd known in law school, and they started to date in a casual, playful way.

One night he took Jeanette to the Saenger Theater, where a road company was doing *Cats* for about the twentieth time. Afterward they stopped at Casamento's for fried oysters. Humming the show-stopper "Memories," she told him about seeing it the first time in New York when she was seventeen, about soaking a whole pack of Kleenex with her tears. About how young she felt, hearing it again.

"Well, that's what the show's about, isn't it?" he asked her. "Rebirth?"

Somehow, in the mood they were in, it seemed only natural for Jeanette to come home with him, drink a few glasses of wine, and spend the night. Their lovemaking might have been an exorcism — except that the house no longer needed it.

A few weeks flickered by, magically swift, overfull with work and pleasure. But on the evening of October 6, 1999 — the date stuck in his memory as September 11, 2001, would afterward — Tommy took Jeanette to Louis Armstrong to catch a flight to Japan, where she had a conference to attend.

He returned home, parked his Acura under the streetlight, and entered the house looking forward to nothing but an empty evening and a long night's rest. Seated at the kitchen table, he poured himself a minimal brandy, opened the latest copy of *Snide* and learned that Dr. Tench Armstrong, vacationing at Lake Garda, had received a summons to appear in court for what the paper clearly hoped would be a knockdown-dragout over the terms of his divorce.

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Both parties (it smirked) *have been hiring PIs and the gumshoes have found out a lot. How many of Dr. A's elderly patients have died under suspicious circumstances? Why is the DEA interested in his medical records? What Bourbon Street barker has his blonde Boopsie been balling? Stay tuned.*

Poor bastard, thought Tommy, with the cool and distant pity the redeemed feel for the lost.

He swallowed the last incandescent drops of brandy, turned out the downstairs lights, and climbed the stairs in the dark. Wasn't darkness his old friend? He was halfway up, humming "The Sounds of Silence," when the house shuddered.

He grabbed the banister and held on. Another tremor hit, followed by muffled knocking — not at the door, but in the walls, all around him. Earthquake? Explosion? Tommy took two full minutes to realize that the knocking meant the sash weights in the windows were swaying like pendulums.

Baffled, he looked down the stairwell, then up. The hallway above was suffused with a dim bronze-red glow. *Oh Christ,* he thought, *the house is on fire.*

He ran up the stairs. The glow of the lamp he'd given away fourteen months before filled the library door. Against the light the angel doorstop was clearly visible in dark profile.

A third tremor hit. The angel rocked, fell over, and cracked. Something came rolling toward Tommy with a low gritty sound, like a turning grindstone, and the angel's blindly smiling head tapped against his shoe.

The knocking resumed, loud and all around. Tommy turned to run, only to find that he wasn't alone in the stairwell. Something was climbing toward him out of the darkness, something big that towered over him from two steps down. Back from Italy, Dr. Armstrong had somehow broken into the house.

The light strengthened. The man looked like hell. His cheeks had the iridescence of meat going bad, and his eyes had sunk in so far that Tommy saw nothing in the sockets but an unpleasant moist glitter. Armstrong's suit hung on him like a gunny sack on a scarecrow. And he *did* smell bad.

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Ignoring Tommy, he stalked past with the nerveless thud and shuffle of a dying syphilitic. A strange sound started in his throat like the rales of a dying man, then rose in cracked and grinding tones.

"*Leave...me...alone!*" he cried. "*Leave...me...alone!*"

Tommy reached out to grab his arm — so he hated the bastard, so what, he knew what was waiting for him down the hall. But the sleeve slipped greasily between his fingers and Armstrong stumbled into the library.

The door closed slowly. The hallway was dark again, and silent. The air felt dense and a foul smell lingered. Unable to retreat or advance, Tommy trembled like the last leaf on a bare tree. Then the door crashed open and Armstrong burst into the hallway.

Something clung to his back, arms around his neck, long teeth fastened in the side of his throat. Together they made a strange hump-backed being with too many legs and arms, lurching from side to side, caroming off one wall and then the other, narrowly missing Tommy and finally thundering down the stairs while the whole house knocked and shuddered.

Something hot was running down Tommy's right leg. For the first time since kindergarten, he'd wet his pants. In the library the Seth Thomas clock coolly began to chime eleven.

Tommy spent the rest of the night in a motel. Unable to sleep, he sat up in bed with the lights and the TV on but the sound off, viewing but not really seeing the flickering procession of drivel and porn.

About four he dozed off, slept a couple of hours, and woke in time for the early-early local news. Turning on the sound — by now he needed to hear a voice, any voice — he contemplated the night's roundup of murders, experts predicting that the stock market bubble would expand forever, John Paul's Popemobile pushing through dense crowds in some nameless city.

Then Doctor Armstrong's face flicked onto the screen. Armstrong as he had been: moon-faced, confident, glowing with health and wealth and foul deeds. The anchorwoman, her voice muzzy with sleep, revealed that he had died the day before in Ravenna, Italy, and that the verdict of the medical examiner there had been cardiopulmonary arrest.

Maybe Tommy squeezed the channel-select button unconsciously.

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Anyway, a scene from a sword-and-sorcery movie appeared. A unicorn grazing in an enchanted forest raised its head, shook its shining mane, and stared through the screen with eyes of burning amber. Its long, twisted horn was dark and wet and running blood.

Tommy fainted. When he woke, the room was sunny and the screen was dead.

That afternoon he returned to his house. He spent half an hour just sitting in the Acura, getting up his nerve. Then he ventured to climb the steps, unlock the front door, and creep inside.

Downstairs was bright and empty. Upstairs — except for the broken angel, whose head smiled blindly up at him from the floor — also seemed untouched. The library looked peaceful to the point of blandness. His work lay everywhere, spread out in piles, just as he'd left it.

His knees felt weak, and he sat down suddenly in the recliner. Gradually his breath slowed and his pulse began to beat normally as he realized that at last he was alone in the house. The real Hannah had died long ago — long before she stopped breathing — and now the false Hannah too was gone. Where she existed now, whether Armstrong was doomed like some sinner in Dante to carry his victim on his back forever, Tommy didn't know and didn't want to know. Let them stumble on, two more of the immortal forms of dread, in some land beyond the screen of the ordinary, beyond the mask of days.

He was curled up in his own bed early that night, when Jeanette called from Tokyo. Her voice was sodden with jet lag, his with exhaustion. They laughed at their own incoherence.

"We sound like two drunks," she said, preparing to ring off.

"Jeanette," he said.

"What, Honey?"

"Tell me something. Do you think I'm nuts?"

"Never met anybody saner."

"Really? You're sure?"

"Totally. Look, I can't talk any more tonight. Be home Tuesday. Love you."

"Love you," he said, and — no longer alone in his house — fell at once into profound and peaceful slumber.

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Several years ago—July of 1999, to be precise—Robert Loy first pun-*ished us with Jack B. Goode's witty investigation of the world of fairy tales, "Sing a Song of Sixpence." In his second case, "A Billboard Lovely as a Tree" (Dec. 2000), the gumshoe took on advertising. Now he addresses a Universal® topic. Be warned: Monstrous puns lie ahead.*

Jack B. Goode and the Neo-Modern Prometheus

By Robert Loy

"Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster."

— Nietzsche

THE HUNCHBACK WITH halitosis that could raise the dead and make 'em start fanning the air with their shrouds tightened the straps that held me to the cold metal table and laid out an array of rusty scalpels and cruddy clamps for his boss.

"Tell me again how this whole thing works," I asked the psycho medico who was going to perform an unwanted operation on the Goode gray matter.

"I've already explained this to you, Mister Goode," the doctor said. "My creature's brains seem to have rotted and he can no longer perform his assignments here at my laboratory, simple though they are. You know, at one time, I thought these creations of mine would be sweeping the country. Turns out sweeping the laboratory is about as challenging an

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intellectual task as he can handle. Therefore we are going to transfer your brain into his body. Here, hold this for a second."

He handed me some miniature lightning-rod-looking gizmo and clamped a cold metal helmet onto my head

"Uh-huh, and what do I get out of this deal?"

He thought for a second.

"Well, I suppose we could transfer the monster's brain into your skull, but can I be frank? — Of course I can, who else could I be?" — and he burst into the kind of laughter I think I've heard referred to as maniacal, and I thought not for the first time that there was something not quite right about this mad scientist — "but seriously, Mister Goode, as I said, the monster's brain is no longer functional. It's nothing more than a mass of soggy used tissues. It's absolutely useless."

"So I'll run for Congress. Or go into advertising. I'd still rather have it than nothing."

"All right, we're ready to begin," the doctor said. "Fritz, go ahead and throw the — "

"Wait! Wait!" I yelled. "You don't want my brain anyway. My brother is much smarter. Let me go and get him — oh, and I just remembered my insurance doesn't cover brain transplants. So — "

Just then the doctor cackled like a crazed eagle again, putting the brakes on my protestations. He shooed the hunchback away and put his hand on the switch that would turn the tall green monster into a brilliant detective and yours truly into a vegetable. (Hopefully a French fry, as that is the only vassal of the vegetable kingdom that Jack B. Goode has ever been able to stomach.)

Somebody started screaming and it took me a second to realize it was me. I didn't recognize my scream voice; I haven't used it since the judge said I had to pay my ex's attorney fees after my last divorce.

Like so many unpleasantnesses Jack B. Goode has found himself in, this whole thing started with a woman in a bar.

"What'll ya have?" asked the barman. He was a baldheaded bruiser with a cauliflower ear and a nose that resembled a long winding cobblestone road. His name was Carlos and he was the proprietor of this pub known — with good reason — as Carl's Bad Tavern.

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"Cirrhosis eventually," I answered, "but tonight a double scotch. Two of 'em."

I lit up a Lucky and wondered if maybe since I was in between cases I should look into the mystery of the detective's disappearing way with the dames. I hadn't had a date since dear old Mom messed up and bought me a palm tree for my birthday. Bless her heart, she thought it was poison oak.

But that mystery might be beyond even Jack B. Goode's deductive reasoning skills. Maybe it was just as well. Maybe I should look on this long lull as an opportunity, you know, use the time to take up yoga or catch up on my poetry reading.

Just then as if in answer to my prayer, came a walking, talking sonnet.

Accent on the word "walking." This broad had legs that were almost as long as my second ex-wife's mean streak.

She sat down, crossed those endless stems, and pulled out a compact. She checked her reflection but didn't do anything to her face other than check out both of her cheeks and smile at her reflection. I didn't blame her. You couldn't have improved anything.

If I had to describe her in one G-rated word, I would describe her as statuesque and hope that I was correct in assuming that was the French word for "stacked." She had black and white hair piled up to Marge Simpson levels on her head and some weird piercings that looked like screws in her neck but that was okay — I can overlook a lot if you're statuesque. I was in love or lust or something in that old familiar zip code, and I figured she musta been feeling pretty close to the same way cuz she sat in the stool next to mine and there were other seats available — not stools, as the place was getting busy, but some over-turned barrels over by the back door with a nice view of the overflowing dumpsters outside. The seats were by no means plush, but a lot of the skirts who had scoped out the joint before her seemed to prefer them to the stools abutting mine.

When you've been without feminine affection as long as I have they all start to look good, but this one woulda caught my eye if I'd been staggering home from a three-day orgy.

"Excuse me, Miss," I said as suavely as I could around that lump in my throat. "Can I buy you a beverage?"

She just shook her head, didn't even look at me. But if she thought that

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was going to discourage me, she didn't know that the B in Jack B. Goode stood for been-a-long-time.

"No, really," I elaborated, "anything you want. Even if it's got umbrellas or little palm trees or something else cutesy sticking up out of it. I'm secure enough in my masculinity to order a sloe gin whiz."

"No thank you, really. I'm not much of a drinker."

I gazed around the bar at the broken windows, the pervo with one hand on the payphone and the other down his pants, at the passed-out patrons and the pickpockets relieving them of much of their worldly goods.

"Well then, why are you here, may I ask? You just come in for the ambiance?"

"No, it's not that. I appreciate your offer, but I don't have time for fun and games. I'm in trouble. I need help."

"Well, you've come to the right place," I said. "Here, let me give you one of my cards."

"A card?" she exclaimed. "Didn't you just hear me say I don't have time for games?"

I stashed the card back in my jacket pocket.

"All right. What's the story, sister? You come into a bar but you don't want to drink, and you're not in the mood for a quick game of Crazy Eights with my business cards. What do you want?"

She patted her zebra-like locks and said, "I am looking for a detective."

I pulled the card back out of my pocket, read it just to make sure, then said, "I'm a detective. What can I do for you?"

"You're a detective? For real?"

"Want to see the gum on the bottom of my shoe?"

"No thanks. I don't like gum any better than I like whiskey."

"It's a joke," I told her.

She thought for a minute then bust out laughing.

"Oh, I get it! Ha ha, you've got me in stitches."

I was going to point out that someone had already beaten me to it — this babe was covered in scars — but thought better of it. She might be sensitive about them, but I have a thing for scars. I don't know if you could call the thing a full-fledged fetish or not, but I've never been able to resist a chick with a cicatrix or two.

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She went on to explain that she was worried about her husband who had been missing for several days.

"Do you think there's a chance he might be dead?" I asked.

"Oh, I know he's dead," she said. "He was dead when I married him."

I shook my head in commiseration.

"Been there, darling. Only I didn't find that out about my first wife until we were on our honeymoon."

MY BANKBOOK was as empty as my datebook, so I took the case even though I don't usually do domestic stuff and I personally woulda preferred it if hubby was dead leaving the missus a note telling her to seek comfort in the arms of a brilliant detective, or failing that, in the arms of someone tall, dark, and hungover.

Don't get me wrong. Messing with married women is against my code. Lucky for me I'm a flop as a cryptologist.

The way she described him was kinda nonspecific — I don't know how many eight feet tall, green skinned, megascarred, flat-headed guys there are in the city, but I bet it's a lot. However, there weren't too many scary castles on top of a hill, which was where she said he worked and where he was last seen, and so since I was getting paid by the job and not by the hour I proceeded thither posthaste.

There was a mob of people milling around the castle brandishing torches and pitchforks and actively planning mayhem when I got out of my car. Holdovers from the Lollapalooza tour last week would be my guess. I elbowed my way through the crowd and up to the door of the castle.

It took a long time before someone answered the doorbell. I had plenty of time to watch the bats play a hearty game of let's-see-who-can-drop-the-biggest-load-of-guano-on-Jack-B.-Goode's-Yugo Cabriolet. When somebody finally did respond I could see why it took so long.

The dude who answered the door was a wall-eyed hunchback with a bum leg that dragged uselessly behind him. All of a sudden I felt kinda bad about figuring that my ingrown toenail was justification enough for parking in the handicapped spot closest to the castle outside.

He didn't let his physical challenges get him down, I'll give him credit

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for that. He gave me a big — albeit lopsided — smile and invited me in.

"The doctor is expecting you," he said, once the front door had stopped creaking.

Well, that seemed unlikely, but I followed the hunchback down a dark, dank corridor. The place was full of cobwebs and spiderwebs and there were even birds of prey flying around in the upper reaches of the cathedral ceiling. My client had told me that her missing husband was the janitor here at the castle; if he performed his husbandly duties in the bedroom as lackadaisically as he did his custodial duties here at his workplace, I felt sure I could steal the scarred-up, skunk-haired girl of my dreams away from him without breaking a sweat.

"I'm looking for a guy that supposedly works here," I said to my hunchbacked host. "According to his wife he doesn't have a name, but she said you'd know who I was talking about if I told you that he has the heart of a saint and the pancreas of a plumber. This ringing any bells for you?"

He stopped walking and turned to look at me over his hump.

"I don't have to ring the bells anymore," he said. "That was my previous job at the college there in Indiana. Now I'm an uppertaker."

It took me a minute to figure out what that meant.

"You mean undertaker?" I said. It was either that or he was the world's slowest amphetamine addict.

"No, I take the bodies up and bring 'em here to the doctor. But lately I can't get to the cemetery because of the weather and because they've added nighttime security. So we can't get new brains for our monster. That's where you come in."

"I'm not sure I dig," I told my newfound friend.

"Oh, that's okay," he reassured me. "You don't have to. I'll do all the grunt work. You're going to be the brains of this operation."

Well, the brains, that sounded about right. Somebody finally realized my mental potential. I was feeling pretty full of myself as we wandered into the laboratory.

A wild-eyed guy in a white lab coat was puttering about with some Bunsen burners or whatever the hell it is these scientific types like to putter with.

"Master," my escort said to the saucer-eyed sawbones, "Mister Goode is here."

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The doc turned. He had wide unblinking eyes and frizzy fair hair that flew in all directions.

"Are you sure it's him, Fritz?" he inquired. "How do you know it's Mister Goode?"

"I had a hunch," he said.

Well, I could have pointed out that he still had it. Instead I picked up an old magazine and sat down to peruse. That's what I thought one was supposed to do in a doctor's office.

But the fruity physician snatched the antique periodical out of my hands and screamed in my face, "It's a *Life!* It's a *Life!*"

Well, actually it was a *U.S. Weekly*, but I didn't correct my host. Mainly because I was distracted. On the other side of the room I espied a not-too-smart-looking green guy with bolts in his neck. I walked over and stood there a minute or two, checking him out. Eight feet tall? Check. Sewed together like a patchwork quilt thrown together by a drunken monkey? Check. Head you could have used for a miniature ironing board? Check.

This was the guy I was looking for, all right, and I woulda grabbed him and took off, but he was strapped down on a metal table. And he probably tipped the scales at two thirds of a ton.

And besides, there was a poker game going on.

That's right, a poker game. My chance to test out that old axiom about unlucky in love, lucky at cards. If that theory was true I'd soon own a pot of money, the deed to a big scary castle, and more bats than there are in all of Louisville.

There were five chairs set up around the card table in the corner, but only three players. The dealer was a pale, older Eastern European gent in a dark three-piece suit that might have been fashionable back in the days of Shakespeare and Charlemagne, but maybe not. I know as much about the Renaissance rag trade as I do about what women want other than for me to leave 'em alone. To his left sat a nondescript fellow with sideburns that — although it might have been a trick of the dim lighting in there — it seemed you could actually watch grow.

The third participant was a fish. And by that I don't mean he was a sucker or a sap. I mean he had scales and he was wet, green, and slimy. I didn't pay him as much attention as one might imagine he merited, both

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because I'd met him before (the last time I'd spent a weekend enjoying all the thrilling sights in DT World), and because of what was going on in the chair next to his.

A hand of five cards floated in the air, and as I watched in amazement, a couple of dollar bills slid their way across the table and into the pot. I also noticed a top hat floating in the air, but the sombrero was as scalpless as the chair was assless.

"I raise," said a disembodied voice from behind the floating cards, and I wasn't sure at first if it referred to the stakes of the game or to the hackles on the back of the Goode neck.

"All right, I see you," said the fish man, which had to be one of the bigger whoppers I've heard in a lifetime of lie-collecting. With one of his flippers, he slid a five-spot into the pot. "And I raise you a fin."

I could see that the piscean player had a full boat — Kings over eights — and I was curious to see if the invisible guy was going to fall for this trap. I thought I might join in the game, seeing as how they had an extra seat, assuming there was room for a guy whose wallet was as sparsely populated as the Northern suburbs of Greenland.

"Hey Gil, mind if I sit in?" I inquired of the fish guy, omitting the part about my bulimic billfold.

"How did you know my name?" he asked.

"Just a hunch," I told him.

"Hey, are you guys talking about me?" Fritz asked from across the room.

"So, what are the stakes?" I asked.

At least that's what I think I asked, it's what I meant to ask. But by the way the old Hungarian-looking dude went off on me, damning my soul and putting a pox on the seventh son of my seventh son (which considering the way the Goode family tree seemed unlikely to branch out any further than to grab the new issues of *Big Bazongas* from the man at the newsstand did not seem something I needed to add to my list of things to worry about). I mean, you'd've thought I'd said something uncomplimentary about his dentures — and I could have, they were uneven and broken and stained from too much marinara sauce, but I was too polite.

"Okay, okay," I said, "forget it, don't blow an artery. Probably too rich for my blood anyway."

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The old dude widened his eyes and gave me another look at his stained choppers. "Perhaps that is something we shall soon discover."

Now, I was confused. Could I play with them or not?

As it turned out, the point was academic, I think the word is, if academic means doesn't make a bit of damn difference. And it didn't make any damn difference: just then a couple of goons grabbed me from behind and threw me down on another cold metal table just like the one the monster occupied.

Next thing I knew they had me strapped down and that was when I drew the attention of my host.

"Mister Goode," the quackpot said. "I certainly want to thank you for volunteering to help us out here."

"First of all, Doc" I said, "volunteers don't usually arrive carried kicking and cursing by a couple of palookas. And second, how did you know my name?"

"Oh, Mrs. Monster called and told us you were coming. Said you fell for her scam like a ton of dominos."

Great, betrayed by a broad again. Maybe I need a better barometer of trustworthiness than cup size and cuteness of scars.

"What's going on here?" was my next question.

"Oh, we're going to transfer your brain into the creature's body."

"What? Why do you want to do that?"

"Could we hurry this up just a bit, Victor?" came a voice from out of the gloom. I craned my neck around till I espied the pale old pensioner all in black sitting at the poker table. "I was just about to put the bite on these chumps when your monster's brain crashed."

"Yeah," Gil chimed in, "I hate to carp but we'd like to get his game going again, especially since I was winning. So do what you have to do to this idiot and let's get on with it." And I could swear that this card shark was looking at me with bated breath when he waved in my direction.

"So that's what you need my brain for? So your big ugly janitor can play poker with a bunch of no-count bums?"

The anemic old-timer gave me an evil smile, unveiling those teeth that could easily outdo a Ginsu knife in a can-cutting contest.

"I assure you, young man," he said in that annoying accent of his, "I am not no-count."

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Just then Fritz bent over to grab some brain-extracting tool from a bottom drawer, exposing about fifty percent of his posterior when he did so. The Transylvanian's sideburned compadre at the card table must have been allergic to the old blue-collar moon, cuz as soon as he saw Fritz's fundament he developed a five o-clock shadow that you'd need a couple of machetes to shave. Jojo the dog-faced boy had a pretty impressive stack of cash in front and he was going to need it — he obviously went through shaving cream faster than my second ex-wife went through messenger boys.

But the situation I was in was of course even hairier than that. I tried to fast-talk my way out of it, it didn't work, the mad scientist threw the switch and this is where you came in and Jack B. Goode checked out.

IF YOU'VE NEVER had your brain swapped out with a monster's, then don't. There's nothing pleasant about it. When the strobe lights in my head finally quit flashing, the room was spinning, my stomach was threatening imminent violent revolution, and my head had somehow become wedged inside the barrel of a BB gun.

In other words, except for the lack of a cocktail napkin with digits scrawled on it that bar belles purported to be their phone numbers but would inevitably turn out to be the Losers at Love Hotline, it was exactly like every other Sunday morning I can remember.

And I was stiff, which was perhaps not surprising. My back hurt, my joints ached, my underarms were more chafed than a hooker's thighs on the day after the buy-one-get-one-free deal.

I opened my mouth to ask the fellows waiting for the poker game to get going again if any of them had a Tylenol or the number to a good masseuse, but all that came out of my mouth was a series of squeaky growls and grunts. I could no more make articulate sounds than I could make time with Catherine Zeta-Jones.

And the itching. Oh my god, the itching was unbearable. And I couldn't even bend my arms, so I couldn't scratch anything. It was torture. I squirmed around hoping to somehow relieve the painful prickling, but my balance was almost as reliable as the brakes on my Cabriolet and I snapped the chains that held me and fell off the operating table.

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I looked down at my hands. They were green and scarred — not to mention a whole lot farther away from my face than I remembered. This was definitely a head-scratching situation, but as soon as I reached up to do just that, I discovered that the Goode gourd was as flat as the Dodgers' chances this year. On its descent, my hand brushed against my neck and felt some Home Depot supplies, holding this planate pate on my shoulders.

Even weirder than that was the sensation I got when I looked across the laboratory and saw the guy I've only seen in a mirror spryly spring up off his metal table.

What the hell? I thought I was supposed to be handsome as ever but with a coconut full of Kleenex. So how come I'm green and huge but still in possession of my original I.Q.?

The good doctor and Fritz were involved in an altercation. My head was pounding like the landlord was tired of waiting for the rent money, so it was hard to follow but the gist of it was that the doc was irked because Fritz had flipped the wrong combination of switches and exchanged not only me and the monster's brains but our essences — our souls if you're inclined to the spiritual.

Oh, so that's what happened. And this is how it feels to be inside a monster's body. It had been so long since that magic moonlit night with Esmerelda that I had forgotten what it felt like. No harm done though, right? We'll just put our space helmets back on, lie back down on the table and start over, right?

Wrong. The monster — difficult to call him that with a straight face now that he was so handsome, but however you want to refer to the guy who was now ambling around in my epidermis — had sized up the situation, pretty quickly for someone of his meager mentality, realized he had gotten the clean end of the stick in this deal and headed for the front door, pausing only long enough to give his former employer a bop on the beezer. Force of habit made him attempt to crash through the door frame, but that didn't work in his new body; and I winced to think that if I ever got my old frame back it was going to ache for months after this fool got done smashing into things with it.

Of course I tried to stop him, but by the time I'd figured out how to operate this new loosely-held-together body and worked out the kinks

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enough to stand up, he'd already made his escape. And he wasn't the only one. The moon was full and in its place in the night sky. Jojo let out a howl and then he broke through the window and loped out of sight. I didn't know where he was going, but judging by all that hair on his back it was probably to buy some sandals and black socks then head out to every single beach I've ever been to. Or maybe he was planning to hop in the Yugo with Jack Version 2.0 and chercez a little femmes. I kinda had him pegged as the wolfish type.

Oh well, Jack B. Goode has always been a look-at-the-bright-side kinda guy, and so I searched around for the silver lining I knew had to be lurking around here somewhere.

Well, the kinks were already starting to work out, I think if I can remember how to get to the gym all the stiffness will work itself out before too long. As for the green skin, well, they've got a tanning booth there at the gym, I should be able to take care of this problem. And the flat head could come in handy for holding my drinks. I've needed a new coffee table ever since I broke my old one that night I mistook it for a burglar and tackled it.

And hey, wait a minute, I am now over eight feet tall and, a quick five-finger foray down into my Duck Heads proved that I was built proportionately. There's a hot-looking babe covered in delicious scar tissue who is so hot for this bod she hired a private dick to bring it home.

No, that's not right. She set me up, right? But she does dig the brute, right? My headache was subsiding but it was still hard to think, and I was so caught up in my mental aerobics I barely heard the old Transylvanian finally ask me to join the game.

"Poker?" he asked.

"Don't be vulgar," I told him. "but just between you and me, I got a feeling the sky's the limit if I play my cards right."

"Why don't you play your cards right over here?"

Hmm, that might be a good idea. Especially since I might need a grubstake to woo that marvelous monstress, and my new mug sported what could charitably be termed a poker face. I mulled over this option while my ears beheld a familiar sound from outside, the stubborn "no-no-no-no-no" sound of my old Yugo refusing to awaken from its slumbers.

"It's a lime! It's a lime!" that crazy-ass doctor screamed. I was going

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to point out that what it actually was was a lemon, but I was keeping a low profile hoping the sawbones wouldn't try to hand me a broom or a mop or something.

I sat down between the clandestine contestant who was holding his cards pretty close to his chest — or his neck or his armpit, who knows — and the foppish fossil. Old Gil made me shell out a couple clams for ante, and then he dealt me my cards, four tens and some other card I was too discombobulated to discern. I tried to say I'll bet my house but my new vocal cords were still pretty rusty and it came out as more of a guttural growl.

There was nothing wrong with my new ears, though. I could hear clear as a bell, Jackmonster digging through the Yugo's glove compartment.

Good luck to you, my friend. You can have it all. I've decided I like your life a hell of a lot better than mine, and after I clean these three clowns out of their savings I'm going to go make a little magic with Mrs. Monster — my Mrs. Monster. You can have everything in that car, that stack of overdue bills, a black book with no numbers in it, an empty checkbook, an empty wallet. Me, I got a poker game to win.

The Transylvanian called me and I was just about to lay my cards down and collect my winnings when the air was rent with a horrific scream.

"What in the world was that?" asked the ghoulish golden-ager.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "The monster evidently found that picture of my third ex-wife I keep in the glove compartment to scare off car thieves. Now c'mon, let's see what you've got."

They turned over their cards and displayed their déclassé playing cards. I raked in the pot. Believe it or not, this evening, which had started out as such a nightmare, was actually turning out to be my lucky night.

"No more for me," said the invisible dude. "I've already lost my shirt and I can't see any reason to stick around and lose my pants as well."

I was going to point out that it really didn't matter much since for all we knew he was playing buck-naked already when *she* came va-va-vooming into the castle.

The delightfully disfigured dame of my dreams. My pock-marked sweetie pie.

My heart was pounding in my stomach — that's right, my stomach.

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(Evidently the good doctor didn't exactly ace anatomy class in med school.)

"Come on, Honey," she said to me, striding up to the table and grabbing my arm. "It's time to go home. You've got a new brain now and I bet you can think of lots of ways to make me scream tonight — and I don't mean in fright."

I don't mind telling you I had to wipe away my first-ever tear of joy before I stood up to start my new life. I'd never been happier in my life. And why not? Life could not possibly be any sweeter. I had a pocketful of money, a beautiful woman who wants me for that best of all possible reasons — my body. I was lucky in cards, lucky in love, and about to get really lucky for the first time in a long time.

I stood up and gave her my arm. She smiled and we headed toward the door that would lead us to the land of happily-ever-after, but we were met there by the monster in my skin. He had found the only thing of value in my car and was pointing it at me with his finger on the trigger.

He didn't say a word — probably still traumatized by that photograph of Phyllis — but by the way he jabbed me with the barrel of the Beretta it was pretty obvious what he wanted me to do.

"Come on, guy," I found my voice and I used it to plead with. "Anything but that."

But he kept on pushing me back toward that damned table.

My lucky night was about to come to an end.

When I woke up, I still had the metal hat on, and I knew right away I was back in my old body.

The castle was empty except for the doctor and me. He was pacing frantically around his ruined laboratory, probably trying to figure out whose HMO he could bill for this fiasco.

I found my fedora, placed it on my once-again more-or-less-round head and started walking toward the door.

What a night. Full of sound and fury, but once again Jack B. Goode got neither paid nor laid.

"Hey, where are you going?" the doctor inquired.

It was way after midnight, and I wasn't ready to face the horror of another night on my own, so there was only one place I could think to go.

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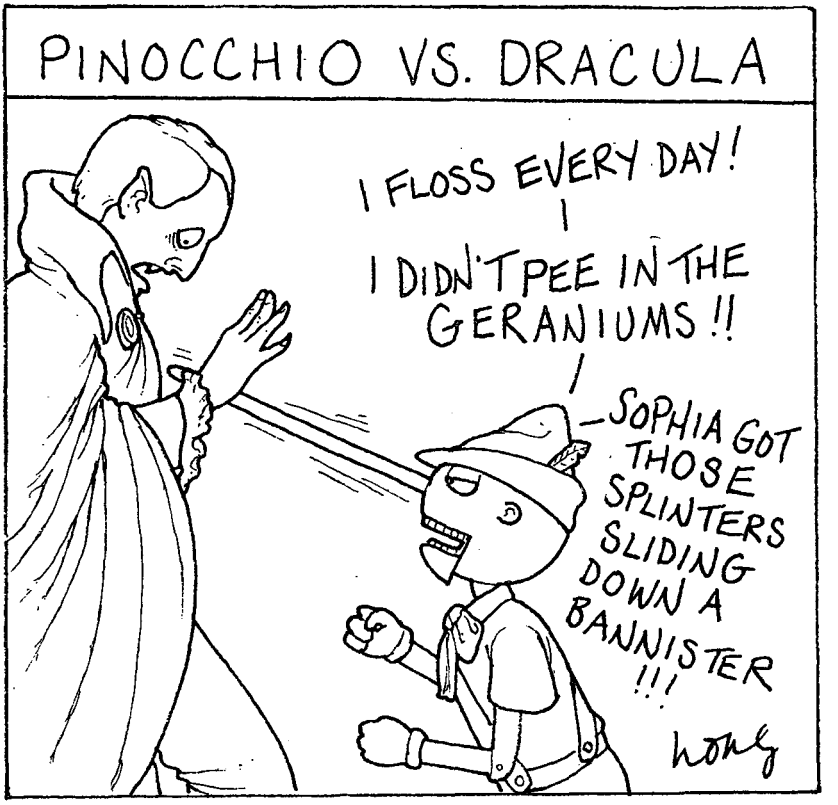
"Back to Carl's Bad Tavern, I guess. Want to come?"

"I don't know," he said. "What's the place like?"

I thought about how best to describe my favorite haunt. The sawdust on the floor, the blood on the walls, the jukebox that hasn't worked right since a dissatisfied client hurled yours truly through the Hank Williams section.

Finally I decided to put it in terms I was sure he could understand.

I threw my hands up in the air and shrieked, "It's a dive! It's a dive!"


PINOCCHIO VS. DRACULA
I FLOSS EVERY DAY!
I DIDN'T PEE IN THE GERANIUMS!!
-SOPHIA GOT THOSE SPLINTERS SLIDING DOWN A BANNISTER!!!
hong

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Changing Teams

THE ENTIRE literary world was in shock. Not since James Frey returned all his royalties on *A Million Little Pieces* had the expectations and fundamental assumptions of millions of readers, bookstore owners, publishers, agents, editors, librarians, journalists, and publicists been so drastically undermined.

Father Anders M. McGreavey had announced his apostasy.

The famous fiction-slinging priest, responsible for more than fifty works of highly moralistic tale-telling, had abandoned his calling. Defrocking himself and also stepping down from his academic positions, Father McGreavey had left behind his sober, sensible home in Chicago and relocated to temporary lodgings — at least all his confused followers prayed they were temporary lodgings — in the historically sleazy Chelsea Hotel in New York City.

Since his unheralded, hasty, and shocking departure, ex-Father McGreavey had remained incommunicado, his future course of action unknown. He had resisted all attempts by the media to interview him, despite offers of hundreds of thousands of dollars from various tabloids.

But he had agreed to speak with me, off the record.

My current job as a senior writer for *Publishers Weekly* did not earn me this unique access, although it was understood that once ex-Father McGreavey was ready to release his full story, my magazine would be the one to break it. Rather, a personal connection had fostered the private interview.

Forty years ago, I had been an altar boy in ex-Father McGreavey's parish. We had maintained our friendship ever since. And my staunch Catholicism had never waned, aligning ex-Father McGreavey and me on the same spiritual plane.

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Or so I had assumed, until his mind-boggling desertion of the Church.

Now, as I tentatively crossed the seedy lobby of the Chelsea, heading for the stairs to ex-Father McGreavey's third-floor room (I had decided to bypass the urinous elevator), I frantically ransacked my mind for any plausible explanation for the novelist's actions. I knew for a fact that no woman was involved — the presence of any such romantic liason would have been impossible to hide — and no other sensible motivation presented itself.

Trudging up the stairs, I tried to imagine the condition in which I would find my old friend: elated, despairing, numb, confused...?

Nothing prepared me, however, for what I encountered.

The door to room 333 swung open to my knock, and there stood ex-Father Anders M. McGreavey.

He was dressed as a Goth: black pants, black shirt, black-painted fingernails, black trench coat, clunky Doc Martens. His eyes sported mascara, his lips black gloss. Macabre silver jewelry festooned his person.

In short, he resembled the publicity pictures of Pat Boone circulating when that quintessential white-bread pop star issued his heavy-metal album.

But ex-Father McGreavy was genuinely angry. Pissed off, in fact. Not so much at me, I suspected, as at the mysterious agent of his change.

"Rory O'Brien! You're late, damn it!"

"I—I'm sorry, Father. The traffic — "

"Don't call me that anymore! Now, get in here!"

I sidled in nervously. The room was a shambles. Teetering piles of CDs and books occupied most flat surfaces. And they were the most unlikely candidates for ex-Father McGreavey's recreational reading and listening I could have conjectured: Black Sabbath, GWAR, Nine Inch Nails, Insane Clown Posse, Aleister Crowley, Laurell K. Hamilton, Clive Barker.

Additionally, the room held enough liquor to outfit a small tavern (although all the bottles were unopened), cartons of cigarettes, a hookah, some bondage gear, and numerous vials of prescription drugs.

I hardly knew where to begin. "Fath — I mean, um, Anders. Is all this really yours?"

Ex-Father McGreavey looked disdainfully around at the sordid accoutrements of his new lifestyle. "Oh, it's mine, all right. Purchased

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it all myself. But you needn't imagine I've sampled any of it. I'm supposed to, according to my instructions. But I just can't bring myself to. Not yet, anyhow."

"Instructions? From whom?"

Casting a jaundiced eye upward, ex-Father McGreavey jerked a thumb ceilingward. "Him. His Nibs."

"God? You've gotten instructions from God to outfit yourself like this?"

The ex-priest removed a marital aid from a chair and dropped down wearily into the seat. I did likewise.

"Exactly. He's been behind the whole thing from the start."

"God Himself told you to quit the priesthood, abandon your old life, and take up this new existence?"

"Yes. Despite all my protests — and you know how I can argue theology! The Lord and I went back and forth over this for months. But at last I was persuaded to do as He asked. Kicking every step of the way, but complying nonetheless."

I was silent for a long time, disbelief obviously manifest on my face, until ex-Father McGreavey exploded at me.

"Look at me, Rory! Dressed like Rasputin and living in this den of sin! You've known me for four decades! Do you really believe that I would act like this on my own impulses? Wouldn't it take divine marching orders to get me to do something like this?"

I had to admit the logic of this. "But — but why? Even assuming that God directed you to behave in this fashion, what possible reason could He have?"

A deep sigh escaped the ex-priest. "It's all connected with my writing."

"But certainly none of your books could have offended God enough to merit this punishment."

"Oh, no, this isn't punishment for my writing. Rather, it's a kind of perverse testament to the magnitude of my literary role. You see, it all begins with that damnable Anne Rice — "

"What possible connection could a tawdry pulp novelist of vampire novels have with you and your work?"

"Now, now, Rory, no need to diminish Anne Rice's literary efforts. Admittedly, her books were not to your taste nor mine. But she was a definite craftswoman with a devoted audience. A figure of some power in the mortal sphere. In fact, her position was rather analogous to my own."

I began to get a faint glimmering of the answer behind this whole

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affair, although at first I could hardly credit it.

"Are you saying, Anders, that since Anne Rice's books glorified darkness and debauchery at the same time that your books magnifed holiness and light — "

The tarted-up familiar face of my friend exhibited impatience with my circumlocutions. "Yes, yes, let's cut to the chase, shall we? While I was working for God, Anne Rice was laboring for the Devil."

Epiphany overtook me. "But she's not working for the Devil any longer. She's renounced her old ways, written that book about Jesus — "

Ex-Father McGreavey shot to his feet. "Precisely! She's jumped Old Scratch's ship! She's switched teams! Apparently there's now some sort of cosmic imbalance. And I've been nominated to set it right!"

"The Lord — the Lord has traded you to Satan?"

Ex-Father McGreavey slumped. "Yes. I understand the same thing happened when C. S. Lewis converted from atheism in 1929. Henry Miller had to abandon his comparatively circumspect youth and move to Paris in that same year, embarking on his famous course of degeneracy."

"But — but this is outrageous!"

"I agree! It's worse than the Cubs dumping Sammy Sosa! In order to fulfill some ancient pact between the Lord and his unholy adversary, I'm expected now to live an utterly dissolute existence and compose books in what is laughably called the 'horror' genre. As if any fictional horror I could conjure up would match the actual misery of my own plight! But what can I do? I've always been obedient to God. I can't stop following His commandments now, even though it looks to the world as if that's precisely what I'm doing! No, I've got to go along with this charade. At least until the balance swings the other way. I imagine if Tim LaHaye took up Satanism, I might be allowed to resume my old life — But no, there's no hope for me! I'm stuck in this new role. The black sheep of God."

I rose from my chair and patted my old friend reassuringly on the shoulder. "At least you'll have the satisfaction of knowing you're helping restore the celestial balance of the universe. And to be frank about your change, surely there must be some, ah, worldly benefits to your new status."

Ex-Father McGreavey looked down at his outfit and grimaced. "Certainly the laundry bills are much less than for all those white robes...." ☙

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Our most prolific contributor, Robert Reed returns after a long absence (two months) with a tale of two brothers in a time of great changes.

Misjudgment Day

By Robert Reed

JAKE WASN'T ANY SPECIES of genius. Not like some people claimed to be. But without any doubts, he would tell the world that he was smart enough to get by. And besides, he'd never made the same mistake twice.

For instance, when Jake was eight and a terrific blizzard had blown through town, he climbed on top of the garage, dragging his little plastic toboggan after him. A neighbor lady spotted him perched on the wind-swept roof, and wearing only her bathrobe, she stepped outside long enough to assure the boy that his logic was flawed. But the snow looked so steep and smooth, and how could there be any danger when there was nothing to fall on but dreamy deep fluff? So Jake launched himself, and the ride was everything he imagined it would be. Sure, the landing was a bit rough, but a week of bed rest put him back into his old life. And wiser by a long shot, he liked to boast.

At fifteen, Jake borrowed his mom's car, and with nothing in his wallet but fifty-two dollars and a learners' permit, he drove out of state to buy boxes of fireworks from a one-handed fellow working out of a U-Haul

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trailer. His baby brother, Mark — who just happened to be a real genius, according to ten different tests — examined his purchases before grimly informing Jake that he was an idiot. The fireworks were obviously made in somebody's garage or tool shed, which meant they were illegal and exceptionally dangerous. "You're going to kill yourself," Mark promised. Which was why Jake took precautions. He waited until it was late at night, keeping witnesses to a minimum. He filled one plastic bucket with water, in case of fire. With a second bucket, he built a launch tube to contain any unfortunate booms. And to hold that bucket in place, he lined the bottom with chunks of scrap concrete. In other words, the resulting mess was his little brother's fault. Who knew that a single defective rocket could generate that kind of blast? Practically every window on the block was blown out. Plus the bucket shattered, and the concrete ballast became shrapnel, one exceptionally malevolent shard smacking Jake in the face and leaving his jaw pretty badly shattered.

But Jake learned from his experience, acquiring a powerful fondness for protective gear. Just short of twenty, he bought an old Kevlar vest from a friend's uncle who once served in the Army. But what's the point in being bulletproof if you never actually proved it? Ten different friends said, "No," to his simple request. But his genius little brother was always the best choice. Mark was a crack shot and not even an occasional drinker, and all Jake had to do was lie, parading around in the vest, claiming that so-and-so was coming over with his deer rifle to pop him a few times.

"Not that idiot," Mark said. "Christ, he can't shoot. And a deer rifle is way too powerful."

"So what should I do?" Jake asked, flashing a big, dismissive grin. "Got a better idea?"

Mark was a practical fourteen. "Why don't you hang the vest on a post and shoot it yourself?"

"Where's the point in that?" Jake asked. "Jeez, where's the fun?"

"Don't do this," Mark begged.

"But it's all set," said Jake. "As soon as my buddy finds the ammo, he's dragging his thirty ought six over here."

"I'll tell on you," Mark threatened.

"Tell who?" Their father was long gone, and it was far too late in the day for Mom to rise to any challenge.

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"Okay," said Mark. "If I'm going to do this, I'll use our twenty-two."

"That pretty little lady's gun?" his big brother teased.

"That's the only way," Mark claimed, trying to look tough. But he was still just a sweet-faced little kid, and both of them knew it.

"Well, then," Jake said, trying not to laugh. "That has to be all right, I guess."

The rifleman suddenly faced an enormous challenge. Mark wanted to be as far back as possible, to help cut the bullet's velocity, but still close enough to be sure of striking the target. He decided on twenty-five feet, and he aimed at the belly, in case the bullet went wide. Which is exactly what happened. The boy was nervous, and his normally steady hands were jumping, and the little bullet accelerated to supersonic speeds, leaping across that tiny distance before striking his much bigger brother directly above his heart.

What Mark suspected and what Jake learned for himself was that even tiny projectiles can have a terrific momentum, and although Kevlar can absorb a bullet, it eats only a portion of the energy. Two ribs were broken with the impact, and the bruise was as ugly as any a grown man could suffer. Yet for the next several weeks, Jake would pull up his shirt and show his wound to everyone who expressed even a passing interest. And to his little brother's horror, he found more than a few souls who were happy to agree with his boneheaded assessment — the wound was an emblem of fortitude and courage.

No, Jake never made obvious mistakes twice. But he had a narrow definition of what was and was not a boneheaded blunder. To his mind, there were no impulsive catastrophes in his life. None of the three ex-wives were errors in judgment, for instance. "Jeez," he claimed, "I'd still go to bed with all of them. At the same time, if I could talk them into it." He had at least seven kids, and each one was a blessing — though he never quite spent time with any of them. And all those bad turns involving jobs and friends were never Jake's fault, but had more to do with lousy luck and other people behaving badly toward him.

To Jake, mistakes were spectacular events, like bullet wounds or a broken jaw. And because he had always survived his "little adventures," including car crashes and a lifetime addiction to beer and boyish courage, he felt entitled to the confident, rakish smile that he wore almost constantly, even on his most miserable day....

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* * *

Jake was nearly forty when that most miserable day began.

By then, the world was rapidly going to hell. At what moment the process actually began, nobody knew for certain. Some experts would claim that it was a slow process visible in voting records and economic records, talk radio and all the other broad measures of society. But really, people have always been idiots. Just because the last three Presidents sucked didn't mean there was reason to stand on the street corner, crying out, "Plague!"

For Jake, the plague began as a bunch of disconnected, barely noticed news items. One night, it was a story about some Wall Street guru selling half of his assets in order to try and corner the gold market. Another night, it was some nonsense about an Asian despot trying to sell his entire country — nukes, army, and cabbage — to Disney. Then five Congressmen suddenly changed political parties, one of them wacky enough to join the Libertarians. And finally the old Pope, conservative as a bullwhip, was giving a mass when he suddenly announced that he didn't have the foggiest clue what God intended for the world.

But those were famous people, which meant they were all flakes.

What bothered Jake was a smaller story: Over the last six weeks, at least half of the world's fighter pilots had been quietly grounded. Jake liked pilots, or at least he thought he would like them if he ever got the chance to meet them. He felt that he had a lot in common with the kid flying an F-18, which was why he took it especially hard when he read about the uptick in accidents, and worse, how all those high-trained men and women were suddenly making goofs while sitting inside their flight simulators.

Fighter pilots were just one of the high-end jobs that took an early beating. Some neurosurgeons and orchestra conductors showed a rather ominous decline in their performances. Paramedics and IT people had the same falloff, though their decline began several weeks later. Any task requiring complex decision-making was subject to failure. And that's where Jake noticed the effects with his own eyes: He was presently working at the auto parts store, and the gang had a betting pool revolving around the NFL. On his Sunday off, Jake liked to drink beer and watch his games, and there was a particularly ominous afternoon when two of the

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most reliable quarterbacks in football history threw up six interceptions each, before halftime, after which their replacements made another eight or nine goofs on their own.

"Something bad's happening," people said on Monday. At work and everywhere, Jake heard the same black warnings. A voice on the radio was talking about how judges were making some crazy decisions lately, and all of the airlines were secretly testing their pilots for some undefined "failure of cognition." And then came news about the breeder reactor in France that was shut down after an engineer decided on a whim to smack a certain valve with a pipe wrench.

Jake hated the news.

"Nothing's happening," he told the gang at work, even when he knew otherwise. "Every judge that I've ever met is an idiot. Believe me. And nukes are dangerous on their best days. And every quarterback has a bad game. Besides, it was the coaches who were calling those dumbass plays."

"But that's what we're talking about," said the new kid. He was a bright-faced fellow who read too much and thought he was smart. "Those coaches were part of the problem. Their thinking was impaired somehow."

"Everybody's stupid," Jake declared, with an astonishingly hopeful tone.

"Car accidents are way up," the brat continued. "Didn't you notice? We're awfully busy lately. Three hundred percent more wrecks and fender benders, according to the insurance companies."

"I haven't seen that," Jake claimed.

But he had. And when he thought about it, he realized that he'd witnessed half a dozen wrecks just in the last couple months. None of them involving him, which was a nice change.

"You don't know what you're saying," Jake told the kid.

"But I'm not saying it." The kid punched up a set of different Webzines, each one screaming about a rise in human-made disasters.

"I don't want to bother with this," Jake said.

"But you have to." A grim but pleasured look came over the kid's face. "And you know what else they're finding?"

"What?" Then Jake thought better of it. "No, don't tell me."

Too late. "Those pilots that are screwing up in the simulators? And

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everybody else afflicted? They've got another big thing in common. They don't even realize something's wrong in their heads. Even when they're crashing into a mountainside, they keep believing that they've done everything right."

Jake went home that night all stirred up.

But his girlfriend would put him in a good mood, he knew. Her name was Sindee, which sounded just like Cindy, and despite that goofy name, she was always something of a rock when it came to opinions and commonsense.

"It's nothing," she promised. "So what if a few more people are having brain-farts? This isn't going to make the world come to an end."

Probably not, he conceded.

"Smart people are working on the problem right now," she said.

Which made Jake wonder about his brother. What did the family genius make of this craziness?

"In another few days, I bet, everything'll be fine."

"Hope so," he squeaked.

"Know what you need?" Sindee said.

"A distraction," he replied hopefully.

His girlfriend nodded and grinned. And when the distraction was finished, he felt warm and good and lazy, and nothing was wrong in the world. Even when he heard sirens blaring in the distance, there wasn't an ounce of worry left him, and he slept hard and woke up early, ready for whatever the day was bringing.

A funny-familiar noise was coming from somewhere close.

Where was Sindee? Outside, he realized. In the predawn gloom, she was working. Jake stepped outside the two-story house that they were sharing, finding his girlfriend dressed in her bathrobe and on top of a second-hand ladder. An exceptionally long orange extension cord dangled beside the ladder, and she was balanced on the rung just under the top rung, bare feet lifting so that her left arm could reach out farther, holding an electric leaf blower up where it could kick the autumn debris out of the rusting gutters.

Jake screamed a couple times before he was noticed.

It was still dark enough that Sindee's face was barely visible. But he

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thought he could see impatience and maybe puzzlement with his puzzlement. She shut off the blower and gazed down at him for a moment, then very firmly reminded him, "If we don't get these leaves out, we'll have a mess later on."

"Granted. But — "

"Jake," she said, "I've got to do this."

Then she turned the blower back on, and with a fearlessness that choked off Jake's breathing, she leaned out into the empty air, pushing a few more brown leaves into a spinning, mostly useless motion.

The housecoat, the roof. The implicit danger.

This whole business looked awfully familiar. And not knowing what else to do, Jake backed off, trying not to distract the crazy woman.

THE MORNING NEWS was full of statistics: Experts armed with graphs told how divorces had been on the rise for months, matched almost perfectly by the number of new marriages. Suicides and conceptions had doubled; murders had tripled; and curiously, charitable giving was up nearly five-fold. Nationwide, daily liquor consumption was reaching New Year's Eve numbers, while recreational drug prices were spiking in response to the sudden demand. Yet at the same time, people were exercising more than ever — judging by the surge in sprained ankles and ruptured ACLs.

Jake dug out his brother's phone number, but it had gone stale long ago. He wasted a few minutes talking to a woman named Florence — an old gal who wouldn't stop jabbering until Jake admitted he was a Libra. Then he massaged his head, trying to dig up the name of that bio-tech company Mark worked for. It was a simple question, and for a terrible moment it seemed that he must have caught the disease. Why couldn't he remember something so easy? But then the name popped into his head, which brought out a smile. And just then, a news conference started, the Surgeon General dressed in full uniform, marching out to tell people what was known and what wasn't.

"This condition — it's premature to call it a disease — seems to be limited to the judgment centers of the brain." Cross-sections of a random head were thrown up on the screen, different patches of white circled and

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wearing complicated, useless names. "The decision-making process is being affected. But nothing else. This is not a sudden onset of Alzheimer's, nor is it mad cow disease. As far as our tests show, IQ scores are unaffected. It's just that the afflicted people are more likely to act impulsively, to feel no fear, and to make judgments before thinking about the consequences."

The Surgeon General paused for a moment. Then with a tight voice, she admitted, "Our preliminary evidence is that this condition, while it has no known agent, is nonetheless spread like a cold is spread. Close proximity with an infected party is the surest way to see a transformation in behavior."

At that moment, Sindee came strutting through the front door, limbs intact, smiling at her morning's accomplishments. "Aren't you going to be late for work?" she asked.

"I called in sick," Jake lied.

"But you're not sick," she snapped. "What kind of attitude's that?"

More than anything, Jake wanted Sindee to keep her distance. And since he couldn't think of any other way to do it, he jumped up and grabbed his car keys off the hook, trying to slip past her.

"Where are you going?"

There was no point in lying. "To find my brother," he said.

"Mark? I didn't think you two talked anymore."

"Yeah," he said. "But I've got questions to ask him. All of a sudden, it seems important."

Sindee laughed.

"You've got to do what you've got to do," she chimed in, brushing the leaf litter off the front of her dirty bathrobe.

Maybe the world was collapsing, but at least the ATMs were working and still stocked up with cash. And gas pumps took a credit card, and vending machines were stocked with pop and waxy chocolate donuts. The traffic was reasonably heavy, most of humanity apparently still needing to pay its bills. Jake drove just under speed limit, heading south out of town. For the first time in his life, he listened to Public Radio — a warm wash of smart voices describing at length how little was known, and how universal the disease was becoming. Most commercial air flights had been

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canceled. Travel was being discouraged, but for the moment, there were no official restrictions. Some voices wanted to close schools and ban all public gatherings. But other experts argued that it was too late to maintain effective quarantines, since whatever the disease agent was, it had already spread to every portion of the civilized world.

Then, as the station was dropping behind the horizon, one of the smart voices suddenly blurted out, "But what about our nuclear weapons? Are they being protected from us?"

Jake killed the radio. In its place, he played the same few CDs again and again. Johnny Cash and the Eagles carried him through the next two states. He filled his tank only at automated pumps. If he couldn't find vending machines standing alone, he didn't bother to eat or drink. Sometimes another car roared up from behind, but unlike every other day in his life, Jake would pull aside and let the speeder pass. In four hundred miles, he saw maybe twenty accidents — crumbled cars pushed to the shoulder, and once, a tipped-over semi abandoned in the median. But nothing seemed as dangerous or awful as he'd imagined. No amateur NASCAR races, or highways cluttered with survivalists breaking for the mountains. The bulk of humanity couldn't have looked more ordinary/boring, spending its day traveling in the proper lane, holding to a mostly legal speed, with the conscientious drivers occasionally nodding to one another as if to say, "My head's working fine, and I'm glad to see yours is too, friend."

At three o'clock, Jake tested the radio again.

Apparently the President had just given a news conference. He heard the same few phrases repeated on every AM station. "Our medical experts are working on the problem," said a sturdy, unflustered voice. "As a precaution, I've ordered our nuclear umbrella to be closed up for the time being. As our Russian brothers have done, for everyone's sake." Then responding to the most pressing question, the leader of the Free World admitted, "I am showing symptoms, yes. Moments of impairment, bursts of great bravery. But since I'm basically just a figurehead in this office, and everyone in the line of succession is equally infected...for the moment at least, I'm making only those decisions I have to make, and only with the total support of everyone around me...."

The news dissolved into an ESPN sports show. For twenty minutes,

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Jake listened to a serious discussion about how the disease would impact next Sunday's games. "We're going to see simpler offenses," he heard. "More instinctive defenses. And plenty of cops to keep rowdy fans in the stands, too."

A rest area popped up on the right.

Jake parked as far from everyone else as possible.

Just to be safe, he walked off into the scrub woods to pee. Then with a leather glove on his hand, he fed quarters into a Coke machine, touching no surface with his own flesh.

Some people were like him, keeping to themselves. But others seemed resigned to the process, or lost. One old guy was bent over beside a long RV, hands wielding two different colors of spray paint. With a focus obvious at a hundred feet, he was painting an elaborate picture on the parking lot's bare pavement. Jake walked close enough to satisfy his curiosity — an orange rose outlined in black — and then the fellow looked up at him, asking, "What do you think?"

"Pretty," Jake lied.

"Not this," the old guy said. "I mean the world. Think we're going to make it through the night?"

"Sure," he replied, feeling like he was lying again.

He drove the last couple hundred miles without a break. Only when Jake pulled off the Interstate did he seriously wonder if Mark still lived in this city. A public phone let him talk to a robot that gave him a wrong phone number. No one answered, but it was most definitely not his brother speaking on the voice mail. Was this just another dumbshit thing to do, driving all this way? Jake risked handling a beat-up phone book, thinking with every turned page that he was being exposed to trillions and zillions of brain-killing viruses. But he found the address for the tech-company, and after referring to the street map, he realized that he was just ten blocks from the front gate.

What was once a country club had been transformed into a corporate park. Armed security guards patrolled the tall iron fences, every one of their ugly faces hidden behind a white mask, helping accent the suspicious eyes. Jake did what he thought was best. He drove straight up to the main entrance and asked to see his brother.

"No visitors today," he was told.

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"But Mark's expecting me," he said. Then with an easy urgency, he added, "It's personal stuff. About our mom."

Their mother died ten years back, but maybe the brains behind those suspicious eyes would feel sorry for him.

A call was made, then a second call.

Finally the head guard returned, leaning down and telling Jake, "Your brother says, 'Hello,' but he can't come out and play today."

"He said that?"

"You'll need to move your car, sir."

"Tell you what," Jake replied. Then he flung open the driver's door hard enough to knock the guard off his feet, and into the sudden mayhem, he shouted, "Move it for me. Thanks!"

"How are those ribs?"

"I don't know," Jake said. "They felt worse that one time... remember...? The day you shot me...?"

They were alone in a large, well-furnished office. Mark was still a little poop, and he still had the young face. But he wasn't exactly boyish anymore. He looked tired and embarrassed, pissed but maybe a little grateful too. Wearing a cumbersome biohazard suit, he seemed half again bigger than he really was. That suit must have been heavy and hot, judging by how he leaned against the nearest wall, taking a breath or two before asking, "Why did you come here, Jake?"

"Can't you guess? To see you."

"But why today?"

"I had some things I wanted to know. I figured if anybody had answers, it was you."

Mark rolled his eyes. "It is a disease, Jake. Isn't that what you want to know? A fast-acting microvirus that has no symptoms except to degrade four or five sites in the human brain, particularly in the prefrontal ventromedial cortex."

"Where'd the bug come from?"

"I don't know, Jake."

"Did you invent it?"

"No." The word was emphatic and defensive. Then Mark added, "There's two or three bio-tech companies in China working with

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neuro-manipulating viral bodies. If I were guessing, I'd say one of their labs built this bug as part of some project, trying to get a different, better kind of bug instead. And then their monster got loose, or somebody released it on purpose — "

"Who in the hell would do that?"

Mark shrugged inside the big suit. "If I'm guessing? Probably some little lab tech passed over for a promotion."

"But you're going to find the cure, right?"

"No."

"Not you, I mean. But somebody will. Won't they?"

"My opinion? Nobody's going to fix this condition. The damage is done, and it looks permanent."

Jake took a moment to think that over.

"But we are lucky," Mark continued. "The virus is showing no signs of mutating. Most of the brain is left untouched. Change a key gene, and we could have all gone blind. Or we might have forever lost our sense of balance. The world could be collapsing into a permanent state of schizophrenia, or hordes of zombies would be roaming the streets, eating human flesh. So you see, as these kinds of plagues might go, we are pretty lucky."

"Lucky?"

"The power is still on, Jake. Governments and social services are still functioning. It's just our individual judgment that's taken a big hit." He paused, and then said, "Jake," a second time, sounding more than a little patronizing. "From here on, like it or not, most of the people in this world are going to behave a lot like impulsive fourteen-year-olds."

Jake took another moment.

"Like your idiot brother," he said.

Mark nodded. "The thought has occurred to me. Yes."

"But who's going to fly our planes?" Jake asked.

The question earned another shrug. "That's easy. Every machine that humans have ever built has been engineered around human frailty. What we will have to do, starting today...we'll have to invest a couple trillion dollars making our planes and other toys safe again. We've got the necessary software and AI technology. And the same fixes can work for other human tasks, too. Surgeons will require robot helpers. New

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innovations will probably take longer, because it's going to be hard for the best minds to concentrate long enough on the right problems. But that isn't a world-killer either."

"The government?"

"Will need new checks and balances. We can't afford to have a President who gets pissed off at another country and goes to war without ninety percent of the Congress agreeing with him." Then Mark paused and laughed softly. "But it's going to be a more passionate government in the future," he admitted. "And that could be a good thing. A great thing, even. This is going to be a world of fourteen-year-olds. The status quo will take a beating every day."

Rubbing at his bruised chest, Jake said, "That guard who pounded on me...is he infected...?"

"I'm sure he is."

"But he was wearing a mask."

"This isn't a common cold, Jake. Microviruses don't ride on fluid. They drift on the wind, and they're far too tiny and tough to be stopped by just a simple filter."

"Then why wear the things?"

"It makes our people feel better, I guess."

Looking at his brother, Jake asked, "Are you infected?"

"I don't believe so. Not yet."

"How many others are here? Like you...?"

"A few dozen of us." Mark lifted a gloved hand. "My shift had just started when we received a confidential warning from a colleague at the CDC. We immediately broke all contact with the outer world. Our labs are designed to be isolated, and those precautions can work both ways, of course. So as long as the seals hold, and as long as we can sterilize enough food and water and air...well, we've probably got a few weeks, maybe even a couple months left...."

"Are you in charge?"

"What's that?"

Gesturing at their surroundings, Jake explained, "This office of yours...it's really nice. I figured you're the big scientist here, our family genius. Aren't you pretty much running this place?"

Behind the transparent faceplate, his brother's face colored. Then

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with a quiet, tight voice, he admitted, "No. No. What I am here...I'm just a well-paid laboratory technician. And that's all I'll ever be."

Here was news that took time to digest.

"You came a very long way," Mark observed. "Just to see me?"

"I thought the world was coming to an end. And you're my only family left. So yeah, I drove here."

"How far, and how fast?"

Jake replayed the trip in a few sentences.

"Did you drink anything on the way?"

"Coke. Nothing else."

"Get into any fights?"

"I behaved myself. And I can do that, regardless what you think."

"I didn't mean that."

"What did you mean?" Jake snapped.

Mark thought for a moment, and then said, "You should be infected by now. But we've been hearing rumors...anecdotal mostly...that maybe one percent of the general population is immune to the disease."

Jake's face grew warmer.

"Past damage to the limbic system seems to play a role." Mark stared at his big brother with new eyes. "The thing is...you're pretty high-functioning, as these kinds of people go. You've never been in prison, and over the years, you've probably learned how to cope with your afflictions."

"That's a weak-ass compliment," Jake complained.

"Here's what I mean," said his little brother. "Eventually, I'm going to get sick. I'm going to have spells of rage and impulses that might kill me. I'm going to have to deal with urges that I didn't have even when I was fourteen. But you...my dangerous sibling...you're going to be one of the steadier, wiser souls in our new world...a source of advice and good counsel...a man others will look up to for your temperament and your cool resolve....

"What do you think about that, Jake?"

He chewed on those words for a long minute. Then Jake rubbed his bruised chest one last time, rose to his feet, saying, "You look silly in that suit. Pull it off, why don't you? Join the living, for a change!"

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Last month it was a unicorn. This month, Billy has an encounter with spacemen that might call Agnes Moorehead to mind for some readers. What lies ahead for young Billy? Only time will tell.

Billy and the Spacemen

By Terry Bisson

"LOOK WHAT I FOUND IN THE driveway," said Billy's father. He held up a little rocket ship. "I almost ran over it. Does it belong to anyone here?"

"No, sir," said Billy.

"We have a problem then," said Billy's father. "It must be a spaceship from another planet."

"Is there anyone inside?" asked Billy's mother. She was carving the turkey. They had turkey every night.

Billy's father held the little rocket ship up to his ear and shook it.

"No," he said. "That means they must be hiding here in the house somewhere."

"May I be excused?" asked Billy.

"Not until you eat your turkey," said Billy's mother.

Billy went to his room and opened his drawer.

It was filled with little spacemen. They had landed in the driveway the night before. They had climbed in the window and hidden in his drawer.

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Billy had pretended to be asleep but he had watched the whole thing from under the covers.

"Who are you?" asked the spacemen when Billy opened the drawer.

Billy told them. "What planet are you from?" he asked.

"Wouldn't you like to know," they said. They were wearing space helmets. "Is this Earth?"

"Yes," said Billy. "You can take off your space helmets. There's plenty of air here. It's not like the Moon."

Billy had learned about the Moon at school. There is no air on the Moon.

"Your air stinks," said the spacemen.

"It does not," said Billy.

"It does so," said the spacemen. They put their helmets back on. "We are here to conquer Earth," they said. "We are going to kill everybody and then it will smell better."

"You are too little," said Billy.

"That's why we need your help," said the spacemen.

"I'm just a little boy," said Billy.

The next morning the spacemen were still in the drawer.

"Look what we found," they said.

"That's just a pencil," said Billy.

"It is not, it's a spear," said the spacemen. "Sharpen it for us."

Billy stuck the pencil in his electric pencil sharpener. A little light came on when the pencil was sharp. He gave it back to the spacemen.

"I think you should go home," he said. "You can keep the pencil."

"It's a spear," said the spacemen. "And we don't care what you think. Take us to your leader. We will kill him and take his keys."

"I have to go to school," said Billy.

"That's even better," said the spacemen. "We can hide in your lunchbox."

"What if I say no?" said Billy.

"Then we'll kill you too," said the spacemen.

Billy took the spacemen to school. They were hiding in his lunchbox. It had a rocket ship on it.

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"That's a stupid lunchbox," said the teacher. "That rocket doesn't look real."

"It does so," said Billy. It was embossed. "And it's full of spacemen. They intend to conquer Earth."

"That I want to see," said the teacher.

"It's your funeral," said Billy.

He opened his lunchbox. The spacemen jumped out and killed the teacher. All the kids screamed.

Pretty soon the police came. They took Billy home.

"The teacher killed himself with a pencil," said the police. "All the kids were screaming."

"It must have been a tragedy," said Billy's mother.

"It was his own fault," said Billy.

Billy went to his room. He dumped the spacemen out of his lunchbox into his drawer.

"You almost got me in trouble," he said. "That was my teacher you killed."

"That was just for practice," said the spacemen. "Now take us to your leader so we can kill him and take his keys."

"What if I say no?"

"Then we'll kill you too," said the spacemen. "But if you help us conquer Earth, we'll make you King."

"Hmmmm," said Billy. "Let me think about it."

Billy was only pretending to think about it. He didn't want to be King. He was just a little boy. But he was afraid of the spacemen. What if they killed him?

He decided to fool them.

"Okay," he said. He took the spacemen into the bathroom and put them on the toilet seat.

"What's this?" they asked. "It's round."

"The White House," said Billy. "It's supposed to be round." He picked up a toothbrush and hid it behind his back.

"Where is your leader?" asked the spacemen.

"Down there," said Billy. "Look."

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The spacemen leaned over the edge and looked down.

Billy knocked them into the water with the toothbrush. Their helmets made them float. Billy flushed the toilet and they disappeared.

Then he flushed it again just to be sure.

"Get a load of this," said Billy's father. He was reading the paper. "Spacemen Suspected in Teacher Death."

"What spacemen?" said Billy's mother. "I never heard anything about any spacemen."

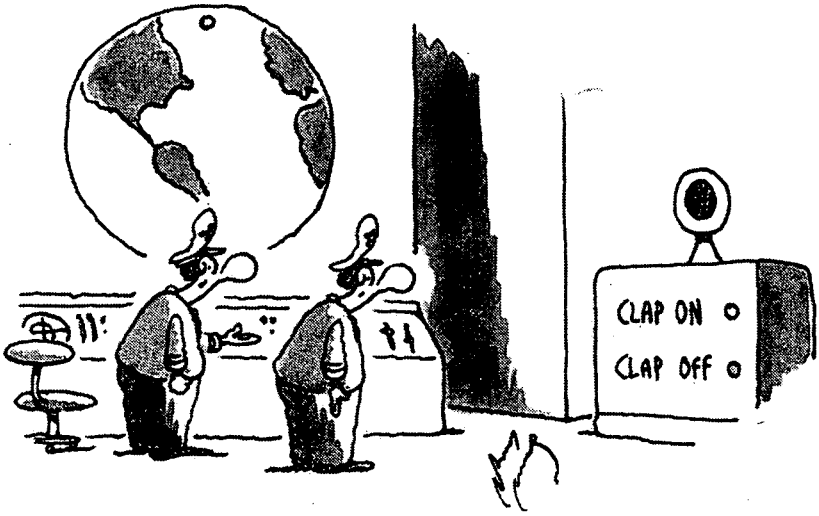
"They were little," said Billy. "But they were mean." He told his parents how he had fooled the spacemen and flushed them down the toilet. "They intended to kill us all and conquer Earth," he said.

"That was a close call," said Billy's father. "I guess we can get rid of this little rocket now."

He took out his hammer and broke it. Then he passed the turkey.

"You could have been King," said Billy's mother. "Instead you are a hero."

"No," said Billy proudly. "I'm just a little boy."



"I'm not sure about this new missile launch system."

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION?

WELL, ALL right.

That consummate revolutionary Joel Silver, in league with those notable subversives, the Brothers Wachowski *(The Matrix)* and the bomb-makers over at Warner Brothers have produced one for you at a cost of seventy million dollars, approximately seventy times the cost of your average revolution. Based on a graphic novel (aren't all sci-fi movies these days?) by Alan Moore and David Lloyd, *V for Vendetta* was originally a reaction against Thatcherite Britain, fueled by tabloid fantasies that inspired Moore to claim in the introduction to the book that Thatcher and her cronies were poised to stamp out homosexuality in Britain and, in fact, were building concentration camps in which they intended to house HIV-positive patients. The Wachowskis have updated the source material, setting Moore's story in the 2020s and stuffing the film with references, both visual and verbal, to the current presidential administration in the United States.

Dystopias and our reactions to them have been the subject of movies since the 1920s, when Fritz Lang and Thea von Harbou gave us *Metropolis*. This sub-genre peaked during the Vietnam era, especially in European cinema, with the release of films such as Godard's *Alphaville*, George Lucas's best movie, *THX 1138*, Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451*, and Peter Watkins's estimable trilogy, *Privilege*, *Peace Game*, and *Punishment Park*, films so controversial that they did not thrive even in an era of conspicuous activism. In the years since, films like *Brazil*, a somewhat sanitized British version of *1984*, Andrew

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Niccol's *Gattaca*, and Verhoeven's Heinlein parody, *Starship Troopers*, have kept the tradition alive. But *V for Vendetta* is the first such picture in quite a while to comment upon a contemporary political condition, and thus it demands to be viewed not only as an entertainment, but to be taken with absolute seriousness.

In the year 202-, the United States, decimated by plague and civil war, has lost its superpower status. It's described by Lewis Prothero (Roger Allam), a government mouthpiece in the Fox News mold who goes by the sobriquet, "The Voice of London," as "the world's largest leper colony." Britain has suffered its own losses — 100,000 died in the St. Mary's Plague — and a ranting Orwellian dictator, Adam Sutler (John Hurt; in one of those meaningless ironies that filmmakers often indulge and delight in, he previously played Winston Smith in the British version of *1984*) has seized power, enforcing his rule through the agency of the Gestapo-like Fingermen, who black-bag the heads of their victims Abu Ghraib-style. The film posits that the fear and inertial slumber of the populace as cultivated by Sutler and his minions are equally responsible for that rule.

Into this sorry exuse for Merrie England comes V (Hugo Weaving), a mysterious caped figure clad in ninja black, a grinning Guy Fawkes mask hiding his mutilated face, armed with knives, kung fu, and a hypodermic that he uses to give lethal injections to the villains who have wronged both him and his country. He announces himself on Guy Fawkes Day by blowing up Old Bailey while broadcasting Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* (a recurring item in the soundtrack) over loudspeakers, and proclaims to a national TV audience that exactly one year from the day he will return to finish the job Fawkes started by blowing up Parliament, hopefully with the help of the awakened British people. Thereafter he dashes about London slaying bad guys and leaving his mark, sort of a cross between the Zorro slash and the anarchist A.

Early in the proceedings, Evey (Natalie Portman), a young woman who works for an approximation of Orwell's Ministry of Truth, is saved by V from rape at the hands of the curfew police. For her own protection, he carries her off to his lair, to which in true comic book fashion he has given a name: the Shadow Gallery. Though initially put off by his menacing appearance and his

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penchant for delivering alliterative pronunciamentos that make it sound as if he were demonstrating the use of the letter V on *Sesame Street*, she eventually comes to sympathize with his politics and becomes more or less his disciple — since her parents were activists who were disappeared, she's not that tough a sell. A relationship develops between them and they spend considerable time discussing politics and art. During these conversations, energy drains from the movie. Weaving tries manfully to animate his mask with his orotund vowels and cultured manner, but it's a losing proposition, and for the most part V remains an enigmatic and rather unprepossessing superhero without portfolio, his personality obscured behind a comic book trope. As for Portman, her British accent wanders in and out, varying from Cockney to upper crust. With her head shaven, as happens when she is imprisoned and tortured, she does an effective Joan of Arc impression. Otherwise, I'm afraid it's not good news. When she wistfully expresses to V that she wishes she could act... well, we're right with her.

The rest of the cast is provided with little to do. Hurt, as Sutler, generally seems disgruntled. Tim Piggot-Smith as Creedy, the leader of the Fingermen, is unrelentingly evil. Stephen Fry as Deitrich, the host of a popular TV show that ultimately ridicules Sutler, does an Oscar Wildeish turn. The most thankless role of all is left to Stephen Rea. Playing Finch, the lead detective in charge of tracking V down, it is up to him to explain things to us, never mind that we have, in many instances, just witnessed the events he is explaining. (This sort of role is becoming such a Hollywood mainstay, it should be categorized and have a special award at Oscar time: the Freeman, short for the Morgan Freeman Award.) Rea handles the gig with sadsack aplomb, chatting with his associate in what has to be one of Britain's most unflappable police stations. Considering that the city is under siege by a dangerous terrorist, and Sutler is haranguing the cops to run him to ground, you would expect to hear a few phones ringing and to see a couple of people scurrying about, acting hassled.

All that said, this is the best adaptation to date of Moore's work (you will understand that this is the faintest of praise if you have seen the other attempts, *The League of Extraordinary Gentleman* being the most recent). The main sections in which *V for Vendetta* comes alive,

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wherein we begin to apprehend some of the artistry of the graphic novel, are the fight scenes. V's cape swirling in silhouette against the night sky, bright knives tumbling in bullet time, gouts of scarlet assisting in the choreography — the Brothers W and their thumb-puppet director James McTeigue are in their comfort zone here, back on *Matrix* turf, and it shows. Then it's back to more boring exposition. The sole exception to this pattern is the longish sequence in which Evey suffers a durance vile. While in prison, she reads letters apparently passed to her by a fellow inmate, a lesbian actress who — fearing that she is soon to die — wants to relate her life story. Ultimately Evey learns, among other things, that the source of V's mutilation and his rage against the machine is an experimental laboratory and a fire from which he emerged with his revolutionary sensibility refined. This sequence succeeds both in moving us and in reflecting Moore's clever narrative style.

Popular culture commonly upchucks the passions of history in distorted form as story panels and chunks of technicolor. Under ordinary circumstances, one would have to be a determined literalist indeed to hold the feet of pop filmmakers to the fire and make them acountable for historical accuracy or the astuteness of their politics — but the times, unfortunately, require accountability when a film seeks to engage its audience in a dialogue about the moral underpinnings of terrorism, when for months we have listened to studio-sponsored bleats about the film's thought-provoking philosophy. *Vendetta* gets off on the wrong foot altogther when it attempts to equate Guy Fawkes, who inhabits the film's moral center, with a freedom fighter — Fawkes was in actuality a seventeenth-century Catholic dissident intent upon the assassination of King James I. That the exposure of his Gunpowder Plot was used by the monarchy to persecute Catholics and foreigners is a point that might have been emphasized by the Wachowskis, but the Brothers W have never done more than skim the surface of their influences. Having, in the *Matrix* sequels, demonstrated a nodding acquaintance with contemporary French philosophy, they herein offer homilies culled from the writings of various political thinkers that come off sounding like pithy wisdoms devised by the owner of an anarchist fortune cookie factory.

"There are no coincidences,

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only the illusion of coincidence," V tells Evey.

Ah yes, Grasshopper.

Small wonder, then, that Alan Moore has called the Wachowski's portrayal of British culture "imbecilic" and removed his name from the picture. The Brothers W have obliterated all but the most token traces of moral ambiguity from his story and replaced his British-grunge mise en scène with one that is bare and unexploited. The Shadow Gallery, V's Phantom-of-the-Opera-like subterranean lair, has much the look of that scene from the *Star Trek* episode "Requiem for Methuselah," in which Kirk and his crew visit a pasteboard castle belonging to an immortal. The opulent quarters and trappings of the Fascist ruling party are handled in the same generic fashion; and — standing in for the oppressed masses of London — a handful of patrons in one particular pub and a single family in their living room show up in repeated scenes throughout the film, all reacting in an identical way according to the dictates of the script (stupefied, terrified, jubilant, etc.). For a film that concerns itself with the arousing of a nation to take political action, *V for Vendetta* is woefully underpopulated, utilizing mere dozens of extras until the final scene. I can't think of an A-list movie in the history of cinema that has been less persuasive in its evocation of a city and a milieu.

To whatever extent you applaud or deplore the Wachowskis for speaking their mind on current events, you have to wonder at their motivations. *The Matrix* pretended a revolutionary stance, but was essentially a highly successful marketing device, the corporate entity affecting a kind or unity with the consumer class, thereby weakening the entire concept of revolution and allowing the corporation to extract more money, more fruits of the consumer's productivity. (For an elaboration of this notion, you may want to consult *Empire and Multitude* by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, a book that cites *The Matrix* to this end.) *V for Vendetta* may be more of the same. But let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that the Brothers W are not so cynical, that they have the interests of their fellow Americans at heart and are giving out a warning, saying don't let this happen here. Are they counseling us to bomb Congress? Doubtful. Are they intending to plant an idea, to provoke thought that may one day lead to action, or are they just surfing the

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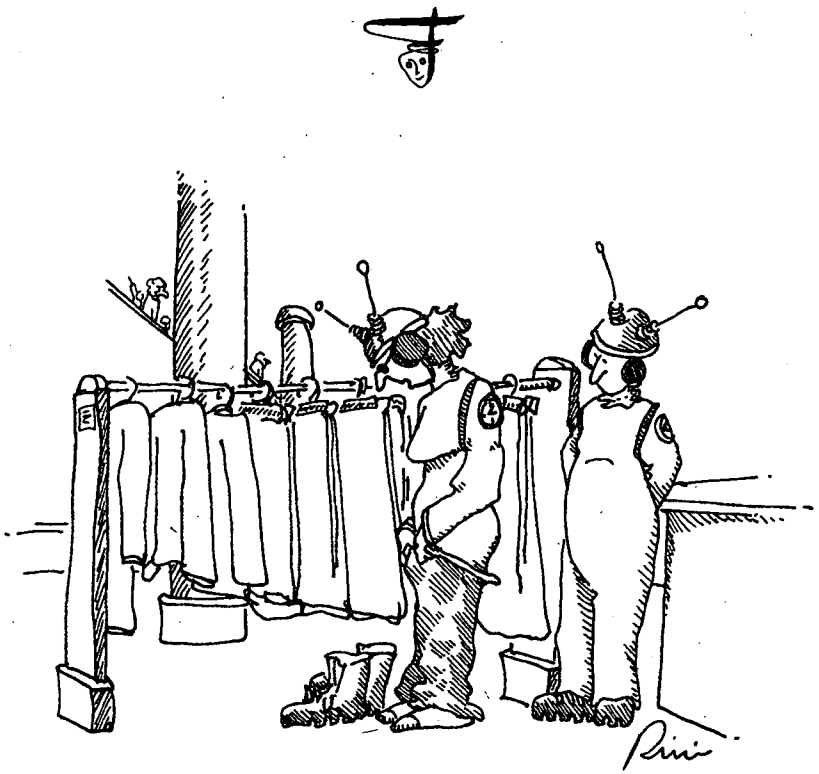
wave of anti-Bush feeling so as to sell their product? If the former is their intent, well, my thought and the thought of most people I know has already been provoked past the point where we might be stimulated by the simplistic message projected by their film. Then the question becomes, at whom are they aiming said message? That answer, I fear, may surface in one or more of the many *V for Vendetta* chatrooms now extant when Galaxion 1408 essays the comment, *Anarchy rules!* To which Jedi99 is likely to reply in short order: *Dude!*



"They don't fit, proving we've gone back to a time before sizes expanded to fit aging Baby Boomers."

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One of our most popular and prolific contributors through the 1990s, Carolyn Gilman has been working for a museum in St. Louis over the past few years and poured a lot of energy into various projects marking the bicentennial anniversary of Lewis & Clark's expedition. Now she's writing more fiction again and we're happy to bring you the first results, an alien invasion story unlike any we've seen recently. Ms. Gilman says she's working on a novel also and we hope to see that before too long.

Okanoggan Falls

By Carolyn Ives Gilman

THE TOWN OF OKANOGGAN Falls lay in the folded hills of southwestern Wisconsin — dairy country, marbled with deciduous groves and pastureland that looked soft as a sable's fur. It was an old sawmill town, hidden down in the steep river valley, shaded by elderly trees. Downtown was a double row of brick and ironwork storefronts running parallel to the river. Somehow, the town had steered between the Scylla and Charybdis of the franchise and the boutique. If you wanted to buy a hamburger on Main Street, you had to go to Earl's Cafe, and for scented soap there was just Meyer's Drugstore. In the park where the Civil War soldier stood, in front of the old Town Hall infested with pigeons, Mr. Woodward still defiantly raised the United States flag, as if the world on cable news were illusion, and the nation were still reality.

American small towns had changed since the days when Sinclair Lewis savaged them as backwaters of conformist complacency. All of that had moved to the suburbs. The people left in the rural towns had a high kook component. There were more welders-turned-sculptors per capita

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than elsewhere, more self-employed dollmakers, more wildly painted cars, more people with pronounced opinions, and more tolerance for all the above.

Like most of the Midwest, Okanoggan Falls had been relatively unaffected by the conquest and occupation. Few there had even seen one of the invading Wattesoons, except on television. At first, there had been some stirrings of grassroots defiance, born of wounded national pride; but when the Wattesoons had actually lowered taxes and reduced regulation, the volume of complaint had gone down. People still didn't love the occupiers, but as long as the Wattesoons minded their own business and left the populace alone, they were tolerated.

All of that changed one Saturday morning when Margie Silengo, who lived in a mobile home on Highway 14, came racing into town with her shockless Chevy bouncing like a rocking horse, telling everyone she met that a Wattesoon army convoy had gone rolling past her house and turned into the old mill grounds north of town as if they meant to stay. Almost simultaneously, the mayor's home phone rang, and Tom Abernathy found himself standing barefoot in his kitchen, for the first time in his life talking to a Wattesoon captain, who in precise, formal English informed him that Okanoggan Falls was slated for demolition.

Tom's wife Susan, who hadn't quite gotten the hang of this "occupation" thing, stopped making peanut butter sandwiches for the boys to say, "They can't say that! Who do they think they are?"

Tom was a lanky, easygoing fellow, all knobby joints and bony jaw. Mayor wasn't his full-time job; he ran one of the more successful businesses in town, a wholesale construction-goods supplier. He had become mayor the way most otherwise sensible people end up in charge: out of self-defense. Fed up having to deal with the calcified fossil who had run the town since the 1980s, Tom had stood for office on the same impulse he occasionally swore — and woke to find himself elected in a landslide, 374 to 123.

Now he rubbed the back of his head, as he did whenever perplexed, and said, "I think the Wattesoons can do pretty much anything they want."

"Then we've got to make them stop wanting to mess with us," Susan said.

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That, in a nutshell, was what made Tom and Susan's marriage work. In seventeen years, whenever he had said something couldn't be done, she had taken it as a challenge to do it.

But he had never expected her to take on alien invaders.

TOWN COUNCIL meetings weren't formal, and usually a few people straggled in late. This day, everyone was assembled at Town Hall by five P.M., when the Wattesoon officer had said he would address them. By now they knew it was not just Okanoggan Falls; all four towns along a fifty-mile stretch of Highway 14 had their own occupying forces camped outside town, and their own captains addressing them at precisely five o'clock. Like most Wattesoon military actions, it had been flawlessly coordinated.

The captain arrived with little fanfare. Two sand-colored army transports sped down Main Street and pulled up in front of Town Hall. The two occupants of one got out, while three soldiers in the other stood guard to keep the curious at arms' length. Their weapons remained in their slings. They seemed to be trying to keep the mood low-key.

The two who entered Town Hall looked exactly like Wattesoons on television — squat lumps of rubbly khaki-colored skin, like blobs of clay mixed with gravel. They wore the usual beige army uniforms that hermetically encased them, like shrink wrap, from neck to heel, but neither officer had on the face mask or gloves the invaders usually employed to deal with humans. An aroma like baking rocks entered the room with them — not unpleasant, just not a smell ordinarily associated with living creatures.

In studied, formal English the larger Wattesoon introduced himself as Captain Groton, and his companion as Ensign Agush. No one offered to shake hands, knowing the famous Wattesoon horror at touching slimy human flesh.

The council sat silent behind the row of desks they used for hearings, while the captain stood facing them where people normally gave testimony, but there was no question about where the power lay. The townspeople had expected gruff, peremptory orders, and so Captain Groton's reasonable tone came as a pleasant surprise; but there was nothing reassuring about his message.

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The Wattesoons wished to strip-mine a fifty-mile swath of the hilly, wooded Okanoggan Valley. "Our operations will render the land uninhabitable," Captain Groton said. "The army is here to assist in your removal. We will need you to coordinate the arrangements so this move can be achieved expeditiously and peacefully." There was the ever-so-slight hint of a threat in that last word.

When he finished there was a short silence, as the council absorbed the imminent destruction of everything they had lived for and loved. The image of Okanoggan Valley transformed into a mine pit hovered before every eye: no maple trees, no lilacs, no dogs, no streetlights. Rob Massey, the scrappy newspaper editor, was first to find his voice. "What do you want to mine?" he said sharply. "There are no minerals here."

"Silica," the captain answered promptly. "There is a particularly pure bed of it underneath your limestone."

He meant the white, friable sandstone — useless for building, occasionally used for glass. What they wanted it for was incomprehensible, like so much about them. "Will we be compensated for our property?" Paula Sanders asked, as if any compensation would suffice.

"No," the captain answered neutrally. "The land is ours."

Which was infuriating, but unarguable.

"But it's our home!" Tom blurted out. "We've lived here, some of us four, five generations. We've built this community. It's our life. You can't just walk in and level it."

The raw anguish in his voice made even Captain Groton, lump of rubble that he was, pause. "But we can," he answered without malice. "It is not within your power to stop it. All you can do is reconcile yourselves to the inevitable."

"How much time do we have?" Paula bit off her words as if they tasted bad.

"We realize you will need time to achieve acceptance, so we are prepared to give you two months."

The room practically exploded with protests and arguments.

At last the captain held up the blunt appendage that served him as a hand. "Very well," he said. "I am authorized to give you an extension. You may have three months."

Later, they learned that every captain up and down the valley had given the same extension. It had obviously been planned in advance.

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The room smoldered with outrage as the captain turned to leave, his job done. But before he could exit, Susan Abernathy stepped into the doorway, along with the smell of brewing coffee from the hall outside.

"Captain Groton," she said, "would you like to join us for coffee? It's a tradition after meetings."

"Thank you, madam," he said, "but I must return to base."

"Susan," she introduced herself, and, contrary to all etiquette, held out her hand.

The Wattesoon recoiled visibly. But in the next second he seemed to seize control of himself and, by sheer force of will, extended his arm. Susan clasped it warmly, looking down into his pebbly eyes. "Since we are going to be neighbors, at least for the next few months, we might as well be civil," she said.

"That is very foresighted of you, madam," he answered.

"Call me Susan," she said. "Well, since you can't stay tonight, can I invite you to dinner tomorrow?"

The captain hesitated, and everyone expected another evasion, but at last he said, "That would be very acceptable. Susan."

"Great. I'll call you with the details." As the captain left, followed closely by his ensign, she turned to the council. "Can I bring you some coffee?"

"Ish. What did it feel like?" said her son Nick.

Susan had become something of a celebrity in the eleven-year-old set for having touched an alien.

"Dry," she said, staring at the laptop on the dining room table. "A little lumpy. Kind of like a lizard."

In the next room, Tom was on the phone. "Warren, you're talking crazy," he said. "We still might be able to get some concessions. We're working on it. But if you start shooting at them, we're doomed. I don't want to hear any more about toad hunts, okay?"

"Have you washed your hand?" Nick wanted to know.

Susan let go of the mouse to reach out and wipe her hand on Nick's arm. "Eew, gross!" he said. "Now I've got toad germs."

"Don't call them that," she said sharply. "It's not polite. You're going to have to be very polite tonight."

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"I don't have to touch him, do I?"

"No, I'm sure touching a grody little boy is the last thing he wants."

In the next room, Tom had dialed a different number. "Listen, Walt, I think I'm going to need a patrol car in front of my house tonight. If this toad gets shot coming up my walk, my house is going to be a smoking crater tomorrow."

"Is that true?" Nick asked, wide-eyed.

"No," Susan lied. "He's exaggerating."

"Can I go to Jake's tonight?"

"No, I need you here," Susan said, hiding the pang of anxiety it gave her.

"What are we having for dinner?"

"I'm trying to find out what they eat, if you'd just leave me alone."

"I'm not eating bugs."

"Neither am I," Susan said. "Now go away."

Tom came in and sank into a chair with a sigh. "The whole town is up in arms," he said. "Literally. Paula wanted to picket our house tonight. I told her to trust you, that you've got a plan. Of course, I don't know what it is."

"I think my plan is to feed him pizza," Susan said.

"Pizza?"

"Why not? I can't find that they have any dietary restrictions, and everyone loves pizza."

Tom laid his head back and stared glumly at the ceiling. "Sure. Why not? If it kills him, you'll be a hero. For about half an hour; then you'll be a martyr."

"Pizza never killed anyone," Susan said, and got up to start straightening up the house.

The Abernathys lived in a big old 1918 three-story with a wraparound porch and a witch's-hat tower, set in a big yard. The living room had sliding wood doors, stained-glass fanlights, and a wood-framed fireplace. It could have been fancy, but instead it had a frayed, lived-in look — heaps of books, puppy-chewed Oriental carpet, an upright piano piled with model airplanes. The comfy, well-dented furniture showed the marks of constant comings and goings, school projects, and meetings. There was rarely a night when the Abernathys didn't have guests, but dinner was never formal. Formality was alien to Susan's nature.

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She had been an RN, but had quit, fed up with the bureaucracy rather than the patients. She had the sturdy physique of a German farm girl, and the competent independence to go with it. Light brown hair, cropped just above her shoulders, framed her round, cheerful face. Only rarely was she seen in anything more fancy than a jean skirt and a shirt with rolled-up sleeves. When they had elected Tom, everyone had known they weren't getting a mayor's wife who would challenge anybody's fashion sense.

That night, Captain Groton arrived precisely on time, in a car with tinted windows, driven by someone who stayed invisible, waiting. Tom met the guest on the doorstep, looking up and down the street a little nervously. When they came into the living room, Susan emerged from the kitchen with a bouquet of wine glasses in one hand and a bottle in the other.

"Wine, Captain?" she said.

He hesitated. "If that is customary. I regret I am not familiar with your dietary rituals. I only know they are complex."

"It's fermented fruit juice, mildly intoxicating," she said, pouring a little bit in his glass. "People drink it to relax."

He took the glass gingerly. Susan saw that he had stumpy nubbin fingers. As a nurse, she had had to train herself to feel compassion even for the least appealing patients, and now she was forced to call on that skill to disregard his appearance.

"Cheers," she said, lifting her glass.

There was a snap as the stem on Captain Groton's glass broke in two. The wine slopped onto his hand as he tried to catch the pieces. "Pardon me," he mumbled. "Your vessel is brittle."

"Never mind the glass," Susan said, taking it and handing the pieces to Tom. "Did you cut yourself?"

"No, of course — " he stopped in mid denial, staring at his hand. A thin line of blood bisected the palm.

"Here, I'll take care of that," she said. Taking him by the arm, she led him to the bathroom. It was not until she had dabbed the blood off with a tissue that she realized he was not recoiling at her touch as he had before. Inwardly, she smiled at small victories. But when she brought out a bottle of spray disinfectant, he did recoil, demanding suspiciously, "What is it?"

"Disinfectant," she said. "To prevent infection. It's alcohol-based."

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"Oh," he said. "I thought it might be water."

She spritzed his hand lightly, then applied a bandage. He was looking curiously around. "What is this place?"

"It's a bathroom," she said. "We use it to — well, clean ourselves, and groom, and so forth. This is the toilet." She raised the lid, and he drew back, obviously repulsed. She had to laugh. "It's really very clean. I swear."

"It has water in it," he said with disgust.

"But the water's not dirty, not now."

"Water is always dirty," he said. "It teems with bacteria. It transmits a thousand diseases, yet you humans touch it without any caution. You allow your children to play in it. You drink it, even. I suppose you have gotten used to it, living on this world where it soils everything. It even falls from the sky. It is impossible to get away from it. You have no choice but to soak in it."

Struck by the startling image of water as filth, Susan said, "Occupying our world must be very unpleasant for you. What is your planet like?"

"It is very dry," he said. "Miles and miles of hot, clean sand, like your Sahara. But your population does not live in the habitable spots, so we cannot either."

"You must drink water sometimes. Your metabolisms are not that different from ours, or you would not be able to eat our food."

"The trace amounts in foods are enough for us. We do not excrete it like you do."

"So that's why you don't have bathrooms," she said.

He paused, clearly puzzled. Then it dawned on him what she had left out of her explanation. "You use this room for excretory functions?"

"Yes," she said. "It's supposed to be private."

"But you excrete fluids in public all the time," he said. "From your noses, your mouths, your skin. How can you keep it private?"

For a moment the vision of humans as oozing bags of bacteria left her unable to answer. Then she said, "That's why we come here, to clean it all off."

He looked around. "But there is no facility for cleaning."

"Sure there is." She turned on the shower. "See?"

He reacted with horror, so she quickly shut it off. She explained, "You see, we think of water as clean. We bathe in it. How do you bathe?"

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"Sand," he said. "Tubs of dry, heated sand. It is heavenly."

"It must be." She could picture it: soft, white sand. Like what lay under the Okanoggan limestone. She looked at him in dawning realization. "Is that why you want — ?"

"I cannot say anything about that," he said. "Please do not ask me."

Which was all the answer she needed.

When they came back out, Tom and the boys were in the kitchen, so that was where they went.

"Sorry, we got caught up in a really interesting conversation," Susan said breezily, with an I'll-tell-you-later look at Tom. "Captain Groton, these are our sons, Ben and Nick." The boys stood up and nodded awkwardly, obviously coached not to shake hands.

"They are both yours?" the Wattesoon asked.

"Yes," Tom said. "Do you have any kids, captain?"

"Yes. A daughter."

"How old is she?" Susan said, pouring some more wine for him in a mug.

Captain Groton paused so long she wondered if she had said something offensive, but finally he shook his head. "I cannot figure it out. The time dilation makes it too difficult. It would mean little to you anyway; our years are so different."

"So she's back home on your planet?"

"Yes."

"Your wife, too?"

"She is dead."

"I'm so sorry. It must have been hard for you to leave your daughter behind."

"It was necessary. I was posted here. I followed my duty."

It had occurred to Susan that perhaps cow-excretion pie was not the thing to offer her guest, so she began rummaging in the cupboard, and soon assembled a buffet of dry foods: roast soybeans, crackers, apple chips, pine nuts, and a sweet potato for moisture. As Tom tried valiantly to engage the captain in a conversation about fishing, she started assembling the pizza for her family. The dog was barking at the back door, so she asked Ben to feed him. Nick started playing with his Gameboy. There was a pleasantly normal confusion all around.

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"What sorts of food do you eat at home?" Susan asked her guest when she had a chance.

Groton shrugged. "We are less preoccupied with food than you are. Anything will do. We are omnivores."

Ben muttered, "Better watch out for our dogs."

"Ben!" Susan rebuked him.

Captain Groton turned marbly eyes on him. "We have no interest in your food animals."

The whole family stared in horror. "Our dogs aren't food!" Ben blurted.

"Then why do you keep them?" the captain asked reasonably.

Tom said, "For companionship."

Ben said, "For fun."

Susan said, "Because they remind us that we're human. Without other species around, we'd forget."

"Ah. I see," the Wattesoon said. "We feel the same."

In the awkward silence that followed, the humans all wondered who were the Wattesoons' pets.

They were saved by the timer. The pizza came out of the oven, and soon all was cheerful confusion again.

The internet had told Susan that Wattesoons were frugal eaters, but Captain Groton seemed ravenous. He ate some of everything she put on the table, including two slices of pizza.

TO SPARE their guest the troubling sight of counters, tabletop, and utensils being smeared with water, Susan asked him out to see the back yard so the others could clean up. The screen door banged shut behind them and the dog came trotting up, eager to smell the stranger, till Susan shooed him into the kitchen. She then led the Wattesoon out into the humid, crickety twilight.

It was a Midwestern evening. The yard backed up onto the river bluff, a weathered limestone cliff overgrown with sumac and grapevine. Susan strolled out past the scattered detritus of Frisbees and lawn darts toward the quiet of the lower yard, where nature had started to encroach. There was an old swing hung from a gnarled oak tree, and she sat down in it,

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making the ropes creak. In the shady quiet, she swung idly to and fro, thinking of other evenings.

She had never realized how desperately she loved this place until she was forced to think of losing it. Looking toward the dark bushes by the cliff, she saw the silent flare of fireflies. "Are you able to find this beautiful?" she said, not trying to hide the longing in her voice.

After a few moments of silence, she looked over to find the captain gazing into the dark, lost in thought. "I am sorry," he said, recollecting himself. "What did you ask?"

Instead of answering, she said, "I think we each get imprinted on a certain kind of landscape when we're young. We can enjoy other spots, but only one seems like we're made from it, down to our bones. This is mine."

"Yes," he said.

"Can you understand how it is for us, then? We talk a lot about our investments and our livelihoods, but that's just to hide the pain. We love this place. We're bonded to it."

He didn't answer at once, so she stopped the swing to look at him.

"I understand," he said.

"Do you?" she said hopefully.

"It changes nothing. I am sorry."

Disappointed, she stared at his lumpy face. Now that she was a little more accustomed to him, he did not seem quite so rubbly and squat. He gave an impatient gesture. "Why are your people so fond of being discontent? You relish resisting, protesting, always pushing against the inevitable. It is an immature response, and makes your lives much harder."

"But, Captain, there are some things that *ought* to be protested."

"What things?"

"Folly. Malice. Injustice."

He cut her off in a pained tone. "These things are part of the nature of the world. There is nothing we can do to prevent them."

"You would not even try?" she said.

"Life is not just. Fairness is a fool's concept. To fight brings only disillusion."

"Well, we are different. We humans can put up with a thousand evils so long as we think they are fair. We are striving all the time to bring about

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justice, in ourselves and our society. Yours too, if you would just let us."

"So your truculence is all an effort to improve us?" the Wattesoon said.

Surprised, Susan laughed. "Why, Captain Groton, no one told me your people had a sense of irony."

He seemed taken aback by her reaction, as if he regretted having provoked it.

"I was not laughing at you," she explained hastily. "At least, not in any way you would not wish."

"You cannot know what I would wish," he said stiffly.

She said, "Oh, I don't know about that." For the time being, here out of all official contexts, he seemed just as difficult and contradictory as any human male. Speculatively, she said, "Your answer just now, about justice. You sounded bitter, as if you spoke from some experience. What was it?"

He stared at her with that unreadable, granitic face. For a few moments she thought he wasn't going to answer. Then he said, "It is in the past. There is no point in talking about it. Today is today. I accept that."

They remained silent for a while, listening to the sounds of life all around. At last Susan said, "Well, the great injustice of *our* lives is still in the future."

The thought of it flooded into her. All of this gentle valley would be gone soon, turned into an open wound in the landscape. Tears came to her, half anger and half loss, and she got up to go back inside. When she reached the back porch, she paused to compose herself, wiping the tears from her face. Captain Groton, who had followed her, said in a startled voice, "You are secreting moisture."

"Yes," she said. "We do that from time to time, in moments of intense emotion."

"I wish — " he started, then stopped.

"Yes? What do you wish?"

"Never mind," he said, and looked away.

That night, lying in bed, she told Tom all she had learned.

"Sand," he said in disbelief. "The bastards are moving us out so they can have bathtub sand."

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He was not feeling charitable toward the Wattesoons. After their dinner guest had left in his tinted limousine, Tom had gotten a call from the mayor of Walker, the closest Wal-Mart metropolis. The captain in charge of their evacuation was an unbending disciplinarian who had presented the residents with a set of non-negotiable deadlines. The news from Red Bluff was even less encouraging. The captain assigned there was a transparent racist who seemed to think evacuation was too good for the native population. Force seemed to be his preferred alternative.

"Larry wants us to mount a unified resistance," Tom said. "A kind of 'Hell no, we won't go' thing. Just stay put, refuse to prepare. It seems pretty risky to me."

Susan lay reflecting. At last she said, "They would think it was an immature response."

"What, like children disobeying?" he said, irritated.

"I didn't say I agreed. I said that was what they would think."

"So what *should* we do?"

"I don't know. Behave in a way they associate with adults. Somehow resist without seeming to resist."

Tom turned his head on the pillow to look at her. "How come you learn all these things? He won't give me anything but the official line."

"You're his counterpart, Tom. He has to be formal with you. I don't count."

"Or maybe you count more. Maybe he's sweet on you."

"Oh, please!"

"Who would have thought I'd lose my wife to a potato?" Tom mused.

She quelled the urge to hit him with a pillow. "You know, he's something of a philosopher."

"Socrates the spud," he said.

"More like Marcus Aurelius. I don't think he really wants to be here. There is something in his past, some tragedy he won't talk about. But it might make him sympathetic to us. We might win him over."

Tom rose on one elbow to look at her earnestly. "My god, he really did open up to you."

"I'm just putting two and two together. The problem is, I'm not sure what winning him over would get us. He's just following orders."

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"Jeez, even one friend among the Wattesoon is progress. I say go for it."

"Is that an order, Mr. Mayor?"

"My Mata Hari," he said, with the goofy, lopsided grin she loved.

She rolled closer to put her head on his shoulder. All problems seemed more bearable when he was around.

IN THE NEXT few weeks, no one saw much of Captain Groton. Information, instructions, and orders still emanated from his office, but the captain himself was unavailable — indisposed, the official line went. When she heard this, Susan called the Wattesoon headquarters, concerned that he had had a reaction to the odd menu she had fed him. To her surprise, the captain took her call.

"Do not concern yourself, Susan," he said. "There is nothing you can do."

"I don't believe you," she said. "You're so in love with stoical acceptance that you could have toxic shock before you'd admit there was anything wrong."

"There is nothing wrong."

"I'm a nurse, Captain Groton. If you are sick, you have become my job."

There was an enigmatic pause on the line. "It is nothing you would recognize," he said at last. "A Wattesoon complaint."

Concerned now that he had admitted it, she said, "Is it serious?"

"It is not mortal, if that is what you mean."

"Can I see you?"

"Your concern is gratifying, but I have no need of assistance."

And she had to be content with that.

In the end, Tom saw him before she did. It was at a meeting the captain couldn't avoid, a progress report on preparations for the evacuation. "It must be some sort of arthritis," Tom answered Susan's questions vaguely. "He's hobbling around with a cane. A bit testy, too."

Not trusting a man to observe what needed to be noticed, Susan called Alice Brody, who had also been at the meeting. She was more than willing to elaborate. "He does seem to be in discomfort," Alice said. "But that's not the strange part."

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Aha, Susan thought.

"He's *taller*, Susan. By inches. And proportioned differently. Not quite so tubby, if you know what I mean. It looks like he's lost a lot of weight, but I think it's just redistributed. His skin is different, too — smoother, a more natural color."

"What do you think is going on?"

"Damned if I know."

That was when Susan got the idea to invite Captain Groton to the Fourth of July celebration. Observing the holiday at all had been controversial, under the circumstances — but the city council had reasoned that a day of frivolity would raise everyone's spirits. The Wattesoons regarded it as a quaint summer festival and completely missed the nationalist connotations, so their only objection was to the potential for disorder from the crowds. When the town agreed to ban alcohol, the occupiers relented.

Okanoggan Falls's Fourth of July always climaxed with the parade, a homegrown affair for which people prepared at least three hours in advance. There was always a chainsaw drill team, a convertible for the Butter Princess, a Dixieland jazz band on a flatbed truck, and decorated backhoes and front-end loaders in lieu of floats. Deprecating self-mockery was a finely honed sport in Wisconsin.

Tom was going to be obliged to ride in a Model T with a stovepipe hat on, so Susan phoned the Wattesoon commander and asked him to accompany her.

"It will be a real demonstration of old-time Americana," she said.

He hesitated. "I do not wish to be provocative. Your townsfolk might not welcome my presence."

"If you were riding in a float, maybe. But mingling with the crowds, enjoying a brat and a lemonade? Some people might even appreciate it. If they don't, I'll handle them."

At last he consented, and they arranged to meet. "Don't wear a uniform," was her last instruction.

She had no idea what a dilemma she had caused him till he showed up in front of Meyer's Drugstore in a ragbag assortment of ill-fitting clothes that looked salvaged from a thrift shop. However, the truly extraordinary thing was that he was able to wear them at all — for when

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she had last seen him, fitting into human clothes would have been out of the question. Now, when she greeted him, she realized they were the same height, and he actually had a chin.

"You look wonderful," she blurted out.

"You are exaggerating," he said in a slightly pained tone.

"Are you feeling all right?"

"Better, thank you."

"But your clothes. Oh dear."

"Are they inappropriate?" he asked anxiously.

She looked around at all the American summer slobbery — men in baggy T-shirts and sandals, women bursting out of their tank tops. "No," she said. "You'll fit right in. It's just that, for a man in your position...." She grabbed him by the hand and dragged him into the drugstore, making for the magazine rack. She found an issue of *GQ* and thrust it into his hands. "Study that," she said. "It will show you what the elite class of men wear." Perusing several other magazines, she found some examples of a more khakified, Cape Cod look. "This is more informal, but still tasteful. Good for occasions like this, without losing face."

He was studying the pictures with a grave and studious manner. "Thank you, Susan. This is helpful." With a pang, she wished Tom would take any of her sartorial advice so to heart.

They were heading for the counter to buy the magazines when he stopped, riveted by the sight of the shelves. "What are these products for?"

"Grooming, personal care," Susan said. "These are for cleaning teeth. We do it twice a day, to prevent our breath smelling bad and our teeth going yellow. These are for shaving off unwanted hair. Men shave their faces every day, or it grows in."

"You mean all men have facial hair?" Captain Groton said, a little horrified.

"Yes. The ones who don't want beards just shave it off."

"What about these?" he said, gesturing to the deodorants.

"We spread it under our arms every day, to prevent unpleasant odors."

Faintly he said, "You live at war with your bodies."

She laughed. "It does seem that way, doesn't it?" She looked down the aisle at the shampoos, mouthwashes, acne creams, corn removers, soaps,

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and other products attesting to the ways in which even humans found their own bodies objectionable.

Beth Meyer was manning the counter, so Susan introduced her to Captain Groton. Unable to hide her hostility, Beth nevertheless said, "I hope you learn something about us."

"Your shop has already been very instructive, Mrs. Meyer," the captain said courteously. "I never realized the ingenuity people devote to body care. I hope I may return some day."

"As long as we're open we won't turn away a customer," Beth said.

Outside, things were gearing up for the parade, and it was clear that people were spontaneously going to use it to express their frustration. Some of the spectators were carrying protest signs, and along the sidewalk one local entrepreneur had set up a Spike the Spud concession stand offering people a chance to do sadistic things to baked potatoes for a few dollars. The most popular activity seemed to be blowing up the potatoes with firecrackers, as attested by the exploded potato guts covering the back of the plywood booth. A reporter from an out-of-town TV station was interviewing the proprietor about his thriving business. The word "Wattesoon" never passed anyone's lips, but no one missed the point.

Including Captain Groton. Susan saw him studying the scene, so she said quietly, "It's tasteless, but better they should work it out this way than in earnest."

"That is one interpretation," he said a little tensely. She reminded herself that it wasn't *her* symbolic viscera plastering the booth walls.

His radio chose that moment to come to life. Susan hadn't even realized he was carrying it, hidden under his untucked shirt. He said, "Excuse me," and spoke into it in his own language. Susan could not tell what was being said, but the captain's voice was calm and professional. When he finished, she said, "Do you have soldiers ready to move in?"

He studied her a moment, as if weighing whether to lie, then said, "It would have been foolish of us not to take precautions."

It occurred to her then that he was their advance reconnaissance man, taking advantage of her friendship to assess the need for force against her neighbors. At first she felt a prickle of outrage; it quickly morphed into relief that he had not sent someone more easily provoked.

"Hey, captain!" The man at the Spike the Spud stand had noticed

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them, and, emboldened by the TV camera, had decided to create a photogenic scene. "Care to launch a spud missile?" The people standing around laughed nervously, transfixed to see the Wattesoon's reaction. Susan was drawing breath to extricate him when he put a restraining hand on her arm.

"I fear you would think me homicidal," he said in an easygoing tone.

Everyone saw then that he understood the message of sublimated violence, but chose to take it as a joke and not a provocation.

"No homicide involved, just potatoes," said the boothkeeper. He was a tubby, unshaven man in a sloppy white T-shirt. His joking tone had a slightly aggressive edge. "Come on, I'll give you a shot for free."

Captain Groton hesitated as everyone watched intently to see what he would do. At last he gave in. "Very well," he said, stepping up to the booth, "but I insist on paying. No preferential treatment."

The boothkeeper, an amateur comedian, made a show of selecting a long, thin potato that looked remarkably like his customer. He then offered a choice of weapons: sledge hammer, ax, firecracker, or other instruments of torture. "Why, the firecracker of course," the captain said. "It is traditional today, is it not?"

"American as beer." One segment of the crowd resented that the Wattesoons had interfered with their patriotic right to inebriation.

The boothkeeper handed him the potato and firecracker. "Here, shove it in. Right up its ass." When the captain complied, the man set the potato in the back of the booth and said, "Say when."

When the captain gave the word, the man lit the fuse. They waited breathlessly; then the potato exploded, splattering the boothkeeper in the face. The onlookers hooted with laughter. Captain Groton extracted himself with an amiable wave, as if he had planned the outcome all along.

"You were a remarkably good sport about that," Susan said to him as they walked away.

"I could have obliterated the tuber with my weapon," he said, "but I thought it would violate the spirit of the occasion."

"You're packing a weapon?" Susan stared. Wattesoon weapons were notoriously horrific. He could have blown away the booth and everyone around it.

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He looked at her without a shade of humor. "I have to be able to defend myself."

The parade was about to commence, and Susan was feeling that she was escorting an appallingly dangerous person, so she said, "Let's find a place to stand, away from the crowd."

"Over here," Captain Groton said. He had already scoped out the terrain and located the best spot for surveillance: the raised stoop of an old apartment building, where he could stand with his back to the brick. He climbed the steps a bit stiffly, moving as if unused to knees that bent.

Okanoggan Falls had outdone itself. It was a particularly cheeky parade, full of double-entendre floats like the one carrying a group called the No Go Banjoes playing "Don't Fence Me In," or the "I Don't Wanna Mooove" banner carried by the high school cheerleading squad in their black-and-white Holstein costumes. The captain's radio kept interrupting, and he spoke in a restrained, commanding voice to whoever was on the other end.

In the end, it all passed without intervention from any soldiers other than the one at Susan's side. When the crowd began to disperse, she found that she had been clenching her fists in tension, and was glad no one else was aware of the risk they had been running.

"What happens now?" Captain Groton said. He meant it militarily, she knew; all pretense of his purpose being social was gone.

"Everyone will break up now," she said. "Some will go to the school ballfield for the fund-raiser picnic, but most won't gather again till the fireworks tonight. That will be about nine-thirty or ten o'clock."

He nodded. "I will go back to base, then."

She was battling mixed feelings, but at last said, "Captain — thank you, I think."

He studied her seriously. "I am just doing my duty."

That night on the television news, the celebration in Okanoggan Falls was contrasted with the one in Red Bluff, where a lockdown curfew was in place, fireworks were banned, and Wattesoon tanks patrolled the empty streets.

A week later, when Susan phoned Captain Groton, Ensign Agush took the call. "He cannot speak to you," he said indifferently. "He is dying."

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"What?" Susan said, thinking she had heard wrong.

"He has contracted one of your human diseases."

"Has anyone called a doctor?"

"No. He will be dead soon. There is no point."

Half an hour later, Susan was at the Wattesoon headquarters with her nurse's kit in hand. When the ensign realized he was facing a woman with the determination of a stormtrooper, he did not put up a fight, but showed her to the captain's quarters. He still seemed unconcerned about his commanding officer's imminent demise.

Captain Groton slumped in a chair in his spartan but private sitting room. The transformation in his appearance was even more remarkable; he was now tall and slender, even for a human, and his facial features had a distinctly human cast. He might have passed for an ordinary man in dim light.

An exceedingly miserable ordinary man. His eyes were red-rimmed, his face unshaved (she noted the facial hair with surprise), and his voice was a hoarse croak when he said, "Susan! I was just thinking I should thank you for your kindness before...." He was interrupted by a sneeze.

Still preoccupied with his appearance, she said, "You are turning human, aren't you?"

"Your microbes evidently think so." He coughed phlegm. "I have contracted an exceedingly repulsive disease."

She drew up a chair next to him. "What are your symptoms?"

He shook his head, obviously thinking the subject was not a fit one. "Don't be concerned. I am resigned to die."

"I'm asking as a professional."

Reluctantly, he said, "This body appears to be dissolving. It is leaking fluids from every orifice. There, I told you it was repulsive."

"Your throat is sore? Your nose is congested? Coughing and sneezing?"

"Yes, yes."

"My dear captain, what you have is called a cold."

"No!" he protested. "I am quite warm."

"That's probably because you have a fever." She felt his forehead. "Yes. Well, fortunately, I've brought something for that." She brought out a bottle of aspirin, some antihistamine, decongestant, and cough suppressant. She added a bottle of Vitamin C for good measure.

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"You are not alarmed?" he asked hesitantly.

"Not very. In us, the disease normally cures itself in a week or so. Since your immune system has never encountered it before, I'm not sure about you. You have to level with me, captain. Have you become human in ways besides appearance?"

Vaguely, he said, "How long has it been?"

"How long has what been?"

"Since I first saw you."

She thought back. "About six weeks."

"The transformation is far advanced, then. In three weeks I will be indistinguishable from one of you."

"Internally as well?"

"You would need a laboratory to tell the difference."

"Then it should be safe to treat you as if you were human. I'll be careful, though." She looked around the room for a glass of water. "Where's your ba — " It was a Wattesoon apartment; of course there was no bathroom. By now, she knew they excreted only hard, odorless pellets. "Where can I get a glass of water?"

"What for?" He looked mildly repulsed.

"For you to drink with these pills."

"*Drink*?"

"You mean to tell me you've had no fluids?"

"We don't require them...."

"Oh, dear Lord. You're probably dehydrated as well. You're going to have to change some habits, captain. Sit right there. I need to run to the grocery store."

At the grocery she stocked up on fruit juices, bottled water, tissues, and, after a moment's hesitation, toilet paper — though not relishing having to explain that one to him. She also bought soap, a washcloth, mouthwash, shaving gel, a packet of plastic razors, a pail, and a washbasin. Like it or not, he was going to have to learn.

She had dealt with patients in every state of mental derangement, but never had she had to teach one how to be human. When she had gotten him to down the pills and a bottle of orange juice, she explained the purpose of her purchases to him in plain, practical language. She showed him how to blow his nose, and explained how a human bladder and bowel worked,

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and the necessity of washing with soap and water. When she finished he looked, if anything, more despairing than before.

"It is not common knowledge to us that you are hiding these bodily deficiencies," he said. "I fear I made a grave error in judgment."

"You're a soldier," she said. "Stop dramatizing, and cope with it."

For a moment he stared, astonished at her commanding tone. Then she could see him marshaling his courage as if to face dismemberment and death. "You are justified to rebuke me," he said. "I chose this. I must not complain."

Soon the antihistamine was making him drowsy, so she coaxed him to return to bed. "You're best off if you just sleep," she told him. "Take more of the pills every four hours, and drink another bottle every time you wake. If you feel pressure and need to eliminate liquid, use the pail. Don't hold it in, it's very bad for you. Call me in the morning."

"You're leaving?" he said anxiously.

She had intended to, but at his disconsolate expression she relented. It made her realize that she could actually read expressions on his face now. She drew up a chair and sat. "I must say, your comrades here don't seem very sympathetic."

He was silent a few moments, staring bleakly at the ceiling. At last he said, "They are ashamed."

"Of what? You?"

"Of what I am becoming."

"A human? They're bigots, then."

"Yes. You have to understand, Susan, the army doesn't always attract the highest caliber of men."

She realized then that the drug, or the reprieve from death, had broken down his usual reticence. It put her in an odd position, to have the occupying commander relying on her in his current unguarded condition. Extracting military or political secrets would clearly violate medical ethics. But was personal and cultural information allowed? She made a snap decision: nothing that would hurt him. Cautiously, she said, "I didn't know that you Wattesoons had this...talent...ability...to change your appearance."

"It only works with a closely related species," he said drowsily. "We weren't sure you were similar enough. It appears you are."

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"How do you do it?"

He paused a long time, then said, "I will tell you some day. The trait has been useful to us, in adapting to other planets. Planets more unlike our own than this one is."

"Is that why you changed? To be better adapted?"

"No. I felt it was the best way to carry out my orders."

She waited for him to explain that; when he didn't, she said, "What orders?"

"To oversee the evacuation on time and with minimal disturbance. I thought that looking like a human would be an advantage in winning the cooperation of the local populace. I wanted you to think of me as human. I did not know of the drawbacks then."

"Well, I don't think you would have fooled us anyway," Susan said a little skeptically. "Can you change your mind now?"

"No. The chameleon process is part of our reproductive biology. We cannot change our minds about that, either."

The mention of reproduction brought up something she had often wondered about. "Why are there no Wattesoon women here?" she asked.

The subject seemed to evoke some sort of intense emotion for him. In a tight voice, he said, "Our women almost invariably die giving birth. The only ones who survive, as a rule, are childless, and they are rare. If it were not for the frequency of multiple births, we would have difficulty maintaining our population. We see the ease with which you human women give birth, and envy it."

"It wasn't always this way," Susan said. "We used to die much more frequently, as well. But that wasn't acceptable to us. We improved our medicine until we solved the problem."

Softly, he said, "It is not acceptable to us, either."

A realization struck her. "Is that what happened to your wife?"

"Yes."

She studied his face. "I think you must have loved her."

"I did. Too much."

"You can't blame yourself for her death."

"Who should I blame?"

"The doctors. The researchers who don't find a cure. The society that doesn't put a high enough priority on finding a solution."

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He gave a little laugh. "That is a very human response."

"Well, *we* have solved our problem."

He considered that answer so long she thought he had fallen asleep. But just as she was rising to check, he said, "I think it is better to go through life as a passerby, detached from both the good and the bad. Especially from the good, because it always goes away."

Gently, Susan said, "Not always."

He looked at her with clouded eyes. "Always."

And then he really did fall asleep.

That evening, after the boys had gone up to their rooms, Susan told Tom everything over wine. Some of her medical details made him wince.

"Ouch. The poor bastard. Sounds worse than puberty, all crammed into nine weeks."

"Tom, you could really help him out," Susan said. "There are things you could tell him, man to man, that I can't — "

"Oh no, I couldn't," Tom said. "No way."

She protested, "But there are things about male anatomy — you expect *me* to warn him about all that?"

"Better you than me," Tom said.

"Coward," she said.

"Damn right. Listen, men just don't talk about these things. How am I supposed to bring it up? More to the point, why? He got himself into this. It was a military strategy. He even admitted it to you: he wanted to manipulate us to cooperate in our own conquest. I don't know why you're acting as if you're responsible for him."

Tom was right. She studied the wine in her glass, wondering at her own reaction. She had been empathizing as if Captain Groton were her patient, not her enemy. He had deliberately manipulated her feelings, and it had worked.

Well, she thought, two could play at that game.

It was not to be a summer of days at the beach, or fishing trips, or baseball camp. Everyone was busy packing, sorting, and getting ready to move. Susan marshaled Nick and Ben into the attic and basement to do the easy part, the packing and stacking, but the hardest part of moving was all hers: making the decisions. What to take, what to leave. It was all a

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referendum on her life, sorting the parts worth saving from the rest. No object was just itself: it was all memories, encapsulated in grimy old toys, birthday cards, garden bulbs, and comforters. All the tiny, pointillist moments that together formed the picture of her life. Somehow, she had to separate her self from the place that had created her, to become a rootless thing.

The summer was punctuated with sad ceremonies like the one when they started disinterring the bodies from the town cemetery, the day when the crane removed the Civil War soldier from the park, and the last church service before they took out the stained glass windows. After the dead had left, the town paradoxically seemed even more full of ghosts.

The protests did not die down. Red Bluff was in a state of open rebellion; a hidden sniper had picked off three Wattesoon soldiers, and the army was starting house-to-house searches to disarm the populace. In Walker, angry meetings were televised, in which residents shouted and wept.

In Okanoggan Falls, they negotiated. The Wattesoons were now paying to move three of the most significant historic buildings, and the school district would be kept intact after relocation. Captain Groton had even agreed to move the deadline two weeks into September so the farmers could harvest the crops — a concession the captains in Red Bluff and Walker were eventually forced to match, grudgingly.

The captain became a familiar face around town — no longer in a limousine, but driving a rented SUV to supervise contractors, meet with civic groups, or simply to stop for lunch at Earl's Cafe and chat with the waitress. Outwardly, there was no longer a hint of anything Wattesoon about him, unless it was his awkwardness when asked to tie a knot or catch a baseball. He had turned into a tall, distinguished older man with silver hair, whose manners were as impeccable as his dress. In social settings he was reserved, but occasionally something would catch his whimsy, and then he had a light, tolerant laugh. At the same time, a steely authority lay just under the surface.

The women of Okanoggan began to notice. They began to approach and engage him in conversation — urgently, awkwardly warm on their side, full of self-conscious laughter; and on his side, studiously attentive but maddeningly noncommittal. People began to talk about the fact that

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he went every week to dine at the Abernathy home, whether Tom was there or not. They noticed when Susan took him to the barber shop, and when they drove together to La Crosse to visit the mall. Her good humor began to irritate the other women in ways it never had before, and their eyes followed her when she passed by.

"She must of kissed that frog good, 'cause he sure turned into a prince," said Jewell Hogan at the beauty salon, and the remark was considered so witty it was repeated all over town.

For herself, Susan had found one more reason to love her life in Okanoggan Falls just before losing it. She was playing a game that gave her life an exotic twist, excitement it had lacked. It was her patriotic duty to lie awake each morning, thinking of ways to get closer to a thrillingly attractive, powerful man who clearly enjoyed her company and relied on her in some unusually intimate ways. In the last month before it all fell apart, her life had become nearly perfect.

Between arranging to move his business and the mayoral duties, Tom was often gone on the nights when Captain Groton came over for dinner. Susan was aware of the gossip — a blushing Nick had told her the boys were taunting him about his mother — but she was not about to let small-mindedness stop her. "Just wait till they see how it pays off," she said to Nick.

It made her think she needed to start making it pay off.

By now, Captain Groton was perforce conversant with the ceremonial foods of the Midwest — string bean casserole, jello salad, brats and beans — and the communal rituals at which they were consumed. So Susan had been entertaining herself by introducing him to more adventurous cuisine. His tastes were far less conservative than Tom's, and he almost invariably praised her efforts. On one night when Tom was returning late, she ordered a pizza for the boys and prepared shrimp with wild rice, cilantro, artichokes, and sour cream, with just a hint of cayenne pepper and lemon. They ate in the dining room with more wine than usual.

The captain was telling her how the amateur scholar who ran the landfill, in one of the endless efforts to deter the Wattesoons from their plans, had tried to convince him that there was an important archaeological site with buried treasure underneath the town. He had even produced

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proof in the form of an old French map and a photo of a metallic object with a mysterious engraved design.

Susan laughed, a little giddy from the wine. "You didn't fall for it, did you?"

Captain Groton looked at her quizzically. "No, I didn't fall down."

His English was so good she almost never encountered a phrase he didn't know. "It's an expression, to fall for something. It means he was pulling your leg."

"Pulling my leg. And so I was supposed to fall down?"

"No, no," she said. "It's just an idiom. To fall for something is to be deceived. On the other hand, to fall for some*one* means to become fond of them, to fall in love."

He considered this thoughtfully. "You use the same expression for being deceived and falling in love?"

It had never struck her before. "I guess we do. Maybe it means that you have to have illusions to fall in love. There *is* a lot of self-deception involved. But a lot of truth as well."

She suddenly became aware how seriously he was watching her, as if the topic had been much on his mind. When their eyes met, she felt a moment of spontaneous chemical reaction; then he looked away. "And when you say 'Okanoggan Falls,' which do you mean, deception or love?" he asked.

"Oh, love, no question."

"But if it meant deception, you would not tell me," he said with a slight smile.

"I am not deceiving you, captain," she said softly. And, a little to her own surprise, she was telling the truth.

There was a moment of silence. Then Susan rose from the table, throwing her napkin down. "Let's go to the back yard," she said.

He followed her out into the hot summer night. It was late August; the surrounding yards were quiet except for the cicadas buzzing in the trees and the meditative sigh of air conditioners. When they reached the deeper grass under the trees, the captain came to a halt, breathing in the fragrant air.

"The thing I was not expecting about being human is the skin," he said. "It is so sensitive, so awake."

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"So you like it now, being human?" she asked.

"There are compensations," he said, watching her steadily.

Her intellect told her she ought to be changing the subject, pressing him on the topic of public concern, but her private concerns were flooding her mind, making it impossible to think. She was slightly drunk, or she never would have said it aloud. "Damn! It's so unfair. Why does such a perfect man have to be an alien?"

A human man would have taken it as an invitation. Captain Groton hesitated, then with great restraint took her hands chastely in his. "Susan," he said, "There is something I need to explain, or I would be deceiving you." He drew a breath to steady himself as she watched, puzzled at his self-consciousness. He went on, "It is not an accident, this shape I have assumed. On my planet, when a woman chooses a man, he becomes what she most wishes him to be. It is the function of the chameleon trait. We would have died out long ago without it." He gave a slight smile. "I suppose nature realized that men can never be what women really want until they are created by women."

Susan was struggling to take it in. "Created by...? But who created you?"

"You did," he said.

"You mean — "

"That first day we met, when you touched me. It is why we avoid human contact. A touch by the right woman is enough to set off the reaction. After that, physiology takes over. Every time you touched me after that, it was biochemical feedback to perfect the process."

All the misery and shock of an interspecies transformation, and she had done it to him? "Oh my God, you must hate me," she said.

"No. Not at all."

Of course not. Her perfect man would never hate her. It would defeat the purpose.

At that thought, she felt like a bird that had flown into a window pane. "You mean you are everything I want in a man?" she said.

"Evidently."

"I thought Tom was what I wanted," she said faintly.

"You already have him," Captain Groton said. "You don't need another."

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She studied his face, custom-made for her, like a revelation of her own psyche. It was not a perfect face, not at all movie-star handsome, but worn with the traces of experience and sadness.

"What about your personality?" she asked. "Did I create that, too?"

He shook his head. "That is all mine."

"But that's the best part," she said.

She couldn't see his face in the dim light, but his voice sounded deeply touched. "Thank you."

They were acting like teenagers. They *were* like teenagers, in the power of an unfamiliar hormonal rush, an evolutionary imperative. The instant she realized it, it shocked her. She had never intended to cheat on Tom, not for a nanosecond. And yet, it was as if she already had, in her heart. She had fantasized a lover into being without even realizing it. He was the living proof of her infidelity of mind.

Trying to be adult, she said, "This is very awkward, captain. What are we going to do?"

"I don't know," he said. "Perhaps — "

Just then, the back porch light came on, and they jumped apart guiltily, as if caught doing what they were both trying to avoid thinking about.

Tom was standing on the back porch, looking out at them. "You're back!" Susan called brightly, hoping her voice didn't sound as strained as she felt. She started up the lawn toward the house, leaving Captain Groton to follow. "Have you eaten?"

"Yes," Tom said. "I stopped at the Burger King in Walker."

"Oh, poor dear. I was just about to make coffee. Want some?"

"I am afraid I must be getting back to base," Captain Groton said.

"Won't you even stay for coffee?" Susan said.

"No, it is later than I realized." With a rueful laugh he added, "Now I understand why humans are always late."

She went with him to the front door, leaving Tom in the kitchen. The captain hesitated on the steps. "Thank you, Susan," he said, and she knew it wasn't for dinner.

Softly, she said, "Your women are lucky, captain."

Seriously, he said, "No, they're not."

"Their lives may be brief, but I'll bet they're happy."

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"I hope you are right." He left, hurrying as if to escape his memories.

When Susan went back into the kitchen, Tom said with studied casualness, "Did you make any headway with him?"

"No," she said. "He's very dutiful." She busied herself pouring coffee. When she handed him his cup, for the first time in their marriage she saw a trace of worry in his eyes. She set the cup down and put her arms around him. "Tom," she said fiercely, "I love you so much."

He said nothing, but held her desperately tight.

And yet, that night as she lay awake listening to Tom's familiar breathing, questions crowded her mind.

There was a hole in her life she had not even known was there. Now that she knew it, she could not ignore the ache. She had settled into a life of compromises, a life of good-enough. And it was no longer good enough.

Yet there was no way for her to have more without hurting Tom. She didn't love him any less for the revelation that he wasn't perfect for her; he was human, after all. None of this was his fault.

She looked at the lump of covers that was her husband, and thought of all she owed him for years of loyalty and trust. Somehow, she needed to turn from possibility and desire, and pass on by. She had to reconcile herself to what she had. It was simply her duty.

THE DAY of the move was planned down to the last detail, the way the Wattesoons did everything. Fleets of moving vans, hired from all over the region, would descend on Okanoggan Falls starting at six thirty A.M. After stopping at the Wattesoon base, they would roll into town at eight sharp and fan out to assigned locations. The schedule of times when each household would be moved had been published in the paper, posted in the stores, and hand-delivered to each doorstep. There was a website where everyone could find their own move time.

The protesters were organized as well. The word had gone out that everyone was to gather at seven A.M. in the park opposite Town Hall. From there, they would march down Main Street to the spot where the highway ran between the bluff and the river, and block the route the trucks would have to take into town.

When Susan and Tom pulled into the mayor's reserved parking spot

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behind Town Hall at six forty-five, it was clear the rally had drawn a crowd. The local police were directing traffic and enforcing parking rules, but not otherwise interfering. Lines of people carrying homemade signs, thermos bottles, and lawn chairs snaked toward the park, as if it were a holiday. Some activists Susan didn't recognize were trying to get a hand-held PA system going.

When Tom and Susan reached the front steps of Town Hall, Walt Nodaway, the Police Chief, saw them and came up. "We've got some professionals from out of town," he said. "Probably drove in from Madison."

"You have enough guys?" Tom asked.

"As long as everyone stays peaceable."

"The officers know not to interfere?"

"Oh, yeah." They had talked it over at length the night before.

A reporter came up, someone from out of town. "Mayor Abernathy, are you here to support the protesters?" she asked.

Tom said, "Everyone has a right to express their opinions. I support their right whether I agree with them or not."

"But do you agree with the people resisting the relocation?"

Susan had coached him not to say "No comment," but she could tell he wanted to right now. "It's hard on people. They want to defend their homes. I know how they feel." Susan squeezed his hand to encourage him.

The city council members had begun to arrive, and they gathered on the steps around Tom, exchanging low-toned conversations and watching the crowd mill around. The protest was predictably late getting started; it was seven thirty before the loudspeaker shrieked to life and someone started to lead a chorus of "We Shall Not Be Moved." People were starting to line up for the two-block march down to the highway when, from the opposite direction, a familiar black SUV came speeding around the police barricades and pulled up in front of Town Hall. A van that had been following it stopped on the edge of the park.

Captain Groton got out, followed by three Wattesoon guards who looked even more lumpish than usual beside their lean commander. All were in sand-colored uniforms. The captain cast an eye over the park, where people had just started to realize that the opposition had arrived, and then he turned to mount the steps. When he came up to Tom he said

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in a low, commanding voice, "A word with you, Mayor Abernathy. Inside." He turned to the city council members. "You too." Then he continued up the steps to the door. The others followed.

A few spectators were able to crowd inside before the Wattesoon guards closed the doors; Susan was one of them. She stood with the other onlookers at the back of the room as Captain Groton turned to the city officials.

They had never seen him really angry before, and it was an unsettling sight. There was a cold intensity about him, a control pulled tight and singing. "I am obliged to hold all of you responsible for the behavior of those people outside," he said. "They must return to their homes immediately and not interfere with the operation in progress." He turned to Tom. "I would prefer that the order come from you, Mayor."

"I can't give them that order," Tom said. "For one, I don't agree with it. For two, they're not going to obey it, regardless of what I say. I'm not their commander, just their mayor. They elected me, they can unelect me."

"You have a police force at your disposal."

"Just Walt and three officers. They can't act against the whole town. There must be four hundred people out there."

"Well then, consider this," Captain Groton said. "I *do* have a force at my disposal. Two hundred armed soldiers. Ten minutes ago, they started to surround the park outside. They are only waiting for my order to move in and start arresting noncompliants. We have a secure facility ready to receive prisoners. It is your decision, Mayor."

Somehow, they had not expected such heavy-handed tactics. "There are children out there, and old people," Tom protested. "You can't have soldiers rough them up. They're just expressing their views."

"They have had three months to express their views. The time for that is over."

"The time for that is never over," Tom said.

Their eyes met for a moment, clashing; then Captain Groton changed his tone. "I am at my wit's end," he said. "You have known from the beginning what we were here for. I have never lied to you, or concealed anything. I have done everything in my power to make you content. I have compromised till my superiors are questioning my judgment. And still you defy me."

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"It's not you, Captain," Tom said in a more conciliatory tone. "You've been very fair, and we're grateful. But this is about something bigger. It's about justice."

"Justice!" Captain Groton gave a helpless gesture. "It is about fantasy, then. Something that never was, and never will be. Tell me this: Do you call the earthquake unjust, or march against the storm?"

"Earthquakes and storms aren't responsible for their actions. They don't have hearts, or consciences."

"Well, if it would help reconcile you, assume that we don't, either."

With a level gaze, Tom said, "I know that's not true."

For a moment Captain Groton paused, as if Tom had scored a hit. But then his face hardened. "I have misled you, then," he said. "We are implacable as a force of nature. Neutral and inevitable. Neither your wishes, nor mine, nor all those people's out there can have the slightest influence on the outcome."

Outside, the crowd had gathered around the steps, and now they were chanting, "The people, united, will never be defeated." For a moment the sound of their voices was the only thing in the room.

In a low tone, Captain Groton said, "Show some leadership, Tom. Warn them to get out of here and save themselves. I can give you ten minutes to persuade them, then I have to give the order. I'm sorry, but it is my duty."

Tom stared at him, angry at the betrayal, furious to be made into a collaborator. Captain Groton met his gaze levelly, unyielding. Then, for an instant, Tom glanced at Susan. It was very quick, almost involuntary, but everyone in the room saw it. And they knew this was about more than principle.

Tom drew himself up to his full height, his spine visibly stiffening. Ordinarily, he would have consulted with the council; but this time he just turned and walked to the door. As he passed by, Susan fell in at his side. The onlookers made way. Not a soul knew what Tom was going to do.

Outside, the Wattesoon guards keeping the crowd away from the door fell back when Tom came out onto the steps. He held up his hands and the chanting faltered to a stop. "Listen up, everyone," he started, but his voice didn't carry. He gestured at the woman with the portable loudspeaker, and she hurried up the steps to give him the microphone.

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"Listen up, everyone," he said again. The crowd had fallen utterly silent, for they saw how grim his face looked. "The Wattesoon soldiers have surrounded us, and in ten minutes they're going to move in and start arresting people."

There was a stir of protest and alarm through the crowd. "They're bluffing," someone called out.

"No they're not," Tom said. "I know this captain pretty well by now. He's dead serious. Now, if you want to get arrested, roughed up, and put in a Wattesoon jail, fine. But everyone else, please go home. Take your kids and get out of here. I don't want you to get hurt. You know they can do it."

On the edges, some people were already starting to leave; but most of the crowd still stood, watching Tom in disappointment, as if they had expected something different from him. "Look, we did our best," he said. "We talked them into a lot of things I never thought they'd give us. We pushed it as far as we could. But now we've reached the point where they're not going to give any more. It's our turn to give in now. There's nothing more we can do. Please, just go home. That's what I'm going to do."

He handed the mike back to its owner and started down the steps. Susan took his hand and walked with him. There was a kind of exhalation of purpose, a deflation, around them as the crowd started breaking up. Though one of the protesters from Madison tried to get things going again, the momentum was gone. People didn't talk much, or even look at each other, as they started to scatter.

Halfway across the park, Susan whispered to Tom, "The car's the other way."

"I know," Tom said. "I'll come back and get it later." She figured out his thinking then: the symbolic sight of them walking away toward home was the important thing right now.

Don't look back, she told herself. It would make her look hesitant, regretful. And yet, she wanted to. When they reached the edge of the park, she couldn't help it, and glanced over her shoulder. The green space was almost empty, except for a little knot of diehards marching toward the highway to block the trucks. On the steps of Town Hall, Captain Groton was standing alone. But he wasn't surveying the scene or the remaining

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protesters. He was looking after her. At the sight, Susan's thoughts fled before a breathtaking rush of regret, and she nearly stumbled.

"What is it?" Tom said.

"Nothing," she answered. "It's okay."

BY EVENING of the second day, it was all over in Okanoggan Falls.

In Red Bluff, there had been an insurrection; the Wattesoon army was still fighting a pitched house-to-house battle with resisters. In Walker, the soldiers had herded unruly inhabitants into overcrowded pens, and there had finally been a riot; the casualty reports were still growing. Only in Okanoggan Falls had things gone smoothly and peacefully.

The moving van had just pulled away from the Abernathy home with Tom and Nick following in the pickup, and Susan was making one last trip through the house to spot left-behind items, when her cell phone rang. Assuming it was Tom, she didn't look at the number before answering.

"Susan."

She had not expected to hear his voice again. All the decisions had been made, the story was over. The Wattesoons had won. Okanoggan had fallen to its enemies.

"Can you spare five minutes to meet me?" he said.

She started to say no, but the tug of disappointment made her realize there was still a bond between them. "Not here," she said.

"Where?"

"On Main Street."

Ben was in the back yard, taking an emotional leave of the only home he had known. Susan leaned out the back door and called, "I have to run into town for a second. I'll pick you up in ten minutes."

Downtown, the streetlights had come on automatically as evening approached, giving a melancholy air to the empty street. The storefronts were empty, with signs saying things like "Closed For Good (or Bad)" tacked up in the windows. As Susan parked the car, the only other living things on Main Street were a crow scavenging for garbage, and Captain Groton, now sole commander of a ghost town.

At first they did not speak. Side by side, they walked down the

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familiar street. Inside Meyer's Drugstore, the rack where Susan had bought him a magazine was empty. They came to the spot where they had watched the Fourth of July parade, and Captain Groton reached out to touch the warm brick.

"I will never forget the people," he said. "Perhaps I was deceiving myself, but in the end I began to feel at ease among them. As if, given enough time, I might be happy here."

"It didn't stop you from destroying it," Susan said.

"No. I am used to destroying things I love."

If there had been self-pity in his voice she would have gotten angry; but it was simply a statement.

"Where will you go next?" she asked.

He hesitated. "I need to clear up some disputes related to this assignment."

Behind them a car door slammed, and Captain Groton cast a tense look over his shoulder. Following his gaze, Susan saw that a Wattesoon in a black uniform had emerged from a parked military vehicle and stood beside it, arms crossed, staring at them.

"Your chauffeur is impatient."

"He is not my chauffeur. He is my guard. I have been placed under arrest."

Susan was thunderstruck. "What for?"

He gave a dismissive gesture. "My superiors were dissatisfied with my strategy for completing my assignment."

Somehow, she guessed it was not the use of force he meant. "You mean...." She gestured at his human body.

"Yes. They felt they needed to take a stand, and refer the matter to a court-martial."

Susan realized that this was what he had wanted to tell her. "But you succeeded!" she said.

He gave an ironic smile. "You might argue that. But a larger principle is at stake. They feel we cannot risk becoming those we conquer. It has happened over and over in our history."

"It happens to us, too, in our way," Susan said. "I think your officers are fighting a universal law of conquest."

"Nevertheless, they look ahead and imagine Wattesoon children

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playing in the schoolyards of towns like this, indistinguishable from the humans."

Susan could picture it, too. "And would that be bad?"

"Not to me," he said.

"Or to me."

The guard had finally lost his patience and started toward them. Susan took the captain's hand tight in hers. "I'm so sorry you will be punished for violating this taboo."

"I knew I was risking it all along," he said, gripping her hand hard. "But still...." His voice held a remarkable mix of Wattesoon resolution and human indignation. "It is unjust."

It was then she knew that, despite appearances, she had won.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

OUR SEPTEMBER ISSUE promises to be a good one. The incomparable Harlan Ellison returns—sort of. See, in his long and storied career, Mr. Ellison has only had two story ideas he couldn't finish. So he gave us one of them, and we turned Michael Libling, Tananarive Due, and Michael Kandel loose on it. The results are very entertaining.

The table of contents next month also includes an item entitled "Dear Starbear." Behind this title waits the correspondence of Ursula K. Le Guin and the late James Tiptree, Jr. Tiptree loved writing letters as much as she enjoyed writing fiction, and that love shows in every missive. These letters are something special.

We've also got great stories lined up by Paolo Bacigalupi, Peter S. Beagle, Carrie Richerson, M. Rickert, and Geoff Ryman, among others. Subscribe now so you won't miss any of them.

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CURIOSITIES

THE MASTER, BY T. H. WHITE (1957)

ELEVEN-year-old twins and their dog marooned on an island ruled by a mind-controlling genius bent on world domination? If that sounds unpromising, please note that *The Master* is one of the last works by the author of *The Once and Future King*, and a rare venture into sf.

The Master, one hundred and fifty-seven years old, frail but adept at telepathy and mesmerism, is pitiful and frightening. White wisely avoids showing too much of him. And though the Master's henchmen look like the supporting cast of a Sax Rohmer melodrama, White gives them sufficient dimension to work against stereotype.

In fact, the tongueless Pinky, the sinister Mr. Blekinsop, the RAF veteran and substitute father-figure Frinton, are, like their creator, brilliant eccentrics. White insists on viewing the world from as skewed an angle as possible. Hardly a chapter goes by without an aside like "It [the door] glowed with secrecy and opulence, saying, 'Yes, in here.'"

As you might expect from this author, the nature of evil comes under examination. World domination is frowned upon, even for logical pacifist reasons. But would you kill a human being to prevent the Master from blackmailing the globe into submission with his tech- and nerve-jangling vibration generators?

Views on the races and sexes are typical of the period, and White is cheerfully reactionary in other ways. The Master's love for Bach's "bloodless fugues" is enough to condemn him, and needless to say "many scientists [are] unbalanced." *The Master* is a visit to another time, a small but charming country despite some unfortunate attitudes.

—Thomas Marcinko

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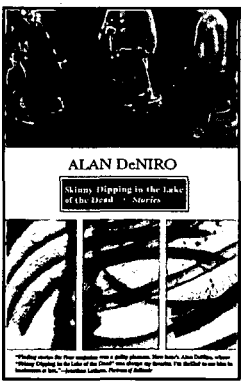
Skinny Dipping in the Lake of the Dead: Stories
Alan DeNiro



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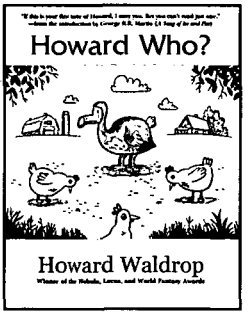
Howard Waldrop



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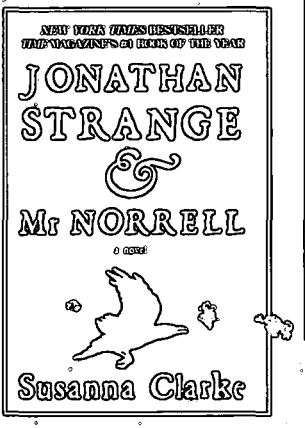

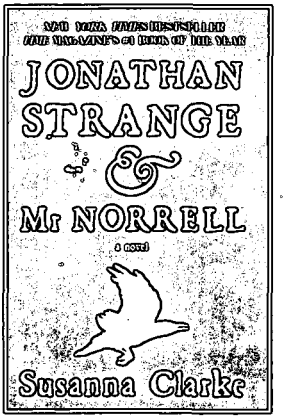

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